

Cycling is right-wing *Jeremy Vine* / Lockdown made me vain *Toby Young*

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THE SPECTATOR



Biden's burden

Can he save the free world, asks *Dominic Green*

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A shot of optimism

At the beginning of the Covid crisis, some expressed the hope that a pandemic might at least bring a divided country back together. Instead, public discourse descended to new levels of bitterness as a fresh schism replaced that caused by Brexit. On one side were those who thought tens of thousands would die because government action was too slow and half-hearted, and on the other, those who thought lockdown to be an over-reaction that inflicted grave damage on our economy and society.

Both sides ought now to be able to agree that this week marks a significant turning point in the pandemic. The first shot of an approved Covid vaccine to be administered in a public programme anywhere in the world was given to Margaret Keenan, a 90-year-old woman in a Coventry hospital. There are still some uncertainties: we don't yet know how good the vaccine is at preventing transmission of the virus, or how long immunity will last.

But as far we can tell from the phase 3 trial involving more than 40,000 volunteers, the Pfizer is 95 per cent effective at preventing infection with the Sars-CoV-2 virus. While a small number of the volunteers given the vaccine did show signs of infection, only one went on to suffer serious illness. As soon as the most vulnerable elderly groups in the population have received their two jabs, the vaccine should start to make a very big difference to the progress of the disease.

For all the government's many failures during the Covid crisis, ministers deserve their moment in the sun. Whether it was foresight or a gamble that paid off, the government's decision to purchase a portfolio of vaccinations early on in their development has given Britain a head start in recovery. We can hope that life will return to normal before any other country, certainly in Europe or North America. That is something to be celebrated, whatever your stance on lockdowns or travel bans.

That said, there is still a small but vociferous minority who are not celebrating the arrival of a vaccine and who will refuse a jab. They are against all vaccines, believing them to be some dark conspiracy with hushed-up side effects. The concerns of this group can be dismissed. Those with a general objection to vaccination ignore the evidence that it has transformed health outcomes. The eradication of smallpox in 1980, for example, is a crowning achievement.

But there is another group whose concerns should not be brushed aside: those who believe the development of the vaccine has been rushed. Why, it's asked, does it normally take ten years for a vaccine to be developed but this time one arrived just nine months after the virus? Ministers should welcome such questions, which offer the opportunity to explain how the science has advanced, the rigorous nature of the regulation — and just why we can be so confident in vaccine safety now.

Under the old technology, it took time to modify, grow and inactivate a virus (or its proteins) to be included in a vaccine. An inactive or weakened version of the virus was injected into the body in the hope of generating an immune response but not a dangerous infection or reaction. The Pfizer vaccine contains no virus and no proteins. It uses innovative gene-based technology called messenger RNA, which stimulates the body to respond to Covid-19, prepping the immune system without nasties. This is a breakthrough that once proven to work can be repurposed for other infectious illnesses, and perhaps even cancer and heart disease.

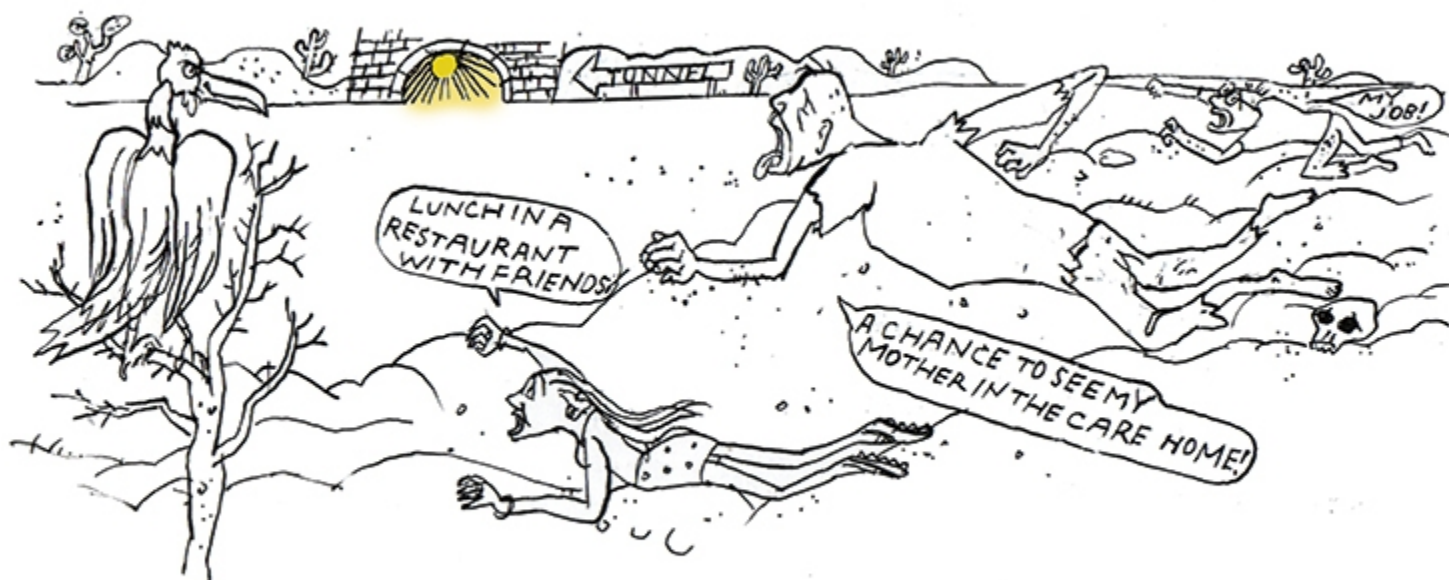
It is demonstrably untrue to say that the Covid-19 vaccine trials have been skimped or undertaken in a less rigorous manner than normal. The trials have involved far more volunteers than for most jabs. Side effects have been properly noted, and all participants in the trials will continue to be observed. Procedures have been accelerated, but through running trials in parallel rather than series. This was because the stakes were huge and vaccine approval could not be undertaken in a rush. So, instead, it started early.

Covid-19 is far from the deadliest disease to strike mankind, but its infectiousness has ensured massive economic disruption. The quickest way out of the crisis is for as many people as possible to take the vaccine, whether or not they feel vulnerable.

Unless the government does something to undermine trust and goodwill — such as issuing 'vaccine passports' — the vaccine should be a success. The power and influence of the anti-vaxxer lobby is vastly overstated. Vaccination rates of British children for common childhood diseases are above 90 per cent. If 90 per cent of UK adults take the vaccine it should be more than enough to bring the epidemic to an end.

It would be too much, however, to hope that the vaccine will put an end to recriminations, which will go on for years regardless. But we can be confident that by the second quarter of next year it will lead to a huge improvement in life in Britain and the world.

PORTRAIT OF THE WEEK



Home

The Pfizer/BioNTech coronavirus vaccine began, rather slowly, to be given to some old people in hospital and health workers. Margaret Keenan, 90, was the first outside clinical trials to receive it. At the beginning of the week, Sunday 6 December, total deaths (within 28 days of testing positive for the coronavirus) had stood at 61,014, including 2,771 in the past week; the number for the week before was 3,617. Rita Ora, the singer, a week after apologising for entertaining 30 people at a birthday party on the ‘spur of the moment’, remembered to apologise for not having gone into quarantine at the time, after returning from Egypt. England’s cricket tour of South Africa was abandoned after a South Africa player and two hotel staff tested positive for coronavirus. A ton of cocaine was found hidden at the London Gateway port at Thurrock, on the Thames, in banana pulp from Colombia bound for Antwerp.

Boris Johnson, the Prime Minister, booked a ticket for Brussels to have dinner with Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, after talks on trading relations with the European Union dragged on with a special kind of tedium bestowed by lack of information combined with unreliable briefing. Suddenly Britain and the EU said they agreed in principle over the trading position of Northern Ireland, so parts of the Internal Market Bill that would break international law were being dropped. Nando’s, the popular chicken restaurant, spent £20 million on anti-coronavirus measures at its 434 branches. Police broke up a nocturnal house party with 150 guests in Nottingham. Peter Alliss, the golfer and commentator, died aged 89. The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge introduced three reindeer to children in Berwick during a three-day 1,250-mile tour of England, Scotland and Wales on the royal train. On their entering Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, the First Minister, remarked coldly: ‘We made sure that the royal household were aware, as you would expect, of the restrictions in place in Scotland.’

Derek Hatton, the 1980s Trotskyist Militant deputy leader of Liverpool City Council, was arrested on suspicion of witness intimidation at the same time that Joe Anderson, the mayor of Liverpool, was arrested by police investigating bribery. Lord Maginnis of Drumglass, aged 82, an Independent Ulster Unionist, was suspended from the House of Lords for 18 months for using bullying language to a security man and using homophobic language about some MPs whom he called queers; he was ordered by the Lords conduct committee to ‘undertake bespoke training and behaviour-change coaching’.

Abroad

The total number in the world who had died with coronavirus reached 1,533,839 by the beginning of the week, an increase of 75,700 from the week before. Belgium had suffered 1,486 deaths per million, compared with 900 for the United Kingdom, a little ahead of the 870 in the United States, which had the highest simple total at more than 280,000 dead. President-elect Joe Biden set a goal of 100 million vaccinations in his first 100 days in office. Argentina imposed a tax on its richest 12,000 people to help pay for coronavirus costs. Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, who was president of France from 1974 to 1981, died of complications from Covid, aged 94. Russia began using its two-part Sputnik V vaccine. Thousands of fireworks exploded in the sky during a fire at a fireworks factory in Rostov-on-Don.

In Hong Kong, Jimmy Lai, the media tycoon and pro-democracy campaigner, aged 72, was charged with fraud and detained until a court hearing in April. Eight people were arrested in connection with a peaceful protest last month at the Chinese University campus in Hong Kong. The height of Mount Everest was agreed by China and Nepal to be 29,032ft; in 1856 it had been put at 29,002ft. Japan planned to increase its falling birth rate by funding matchmaking backed by AI.

President Nicolás Maduro’s party gained control of Venezuela’s national assembly after elections boycotted by the opposition. After seven weeks, a bush fire on Fraser Island, Queensland, had burnt 320 square miles. Uber dropped its plans for a self-driving car and made a deal with Aurora, an autonomous vehicle start-up. Bob Dylan, aged 79, sold the rights to his back catalogue to the American-based Universal Music Group for a sum said to be between \$200 million and \$450 million. Competitive breakdancing will form part of the 2024 Olympics, in Paris.

CSH

DIARY

Jeremy Vine



‘Stopping the diary/’ wrote Philip Larkin, ‘Was a stun to memory,/ Was a blank starting.’ I never really understood those lines until Covid. The pandemic has turned my diary into an acre of white space, like the gymnasium wall at school just begging for some adolescent graffiti. ‘PARTY,’ I want to scribble. ‘SMALL FLAT, 100 PEOPLE, 8 P.M. BRING A BOTTLE.’ The damping down of all social activity this year has made the question ‘What did you do over the weekend?’ crassly offensive, or even something more sinister. Am I being asked this by a member of the new Stasi trying to catch me out? Before the pandemic I used to pretend to have an interesting life. Now I admit to a boring one: ‘Nothing,’ I reply.

Time and again, I have heard sentences that start: ‘2020 has been the worst year since...’. The line is often completed with a historical fact which allows the speaker to show off. The more obscure, the better. ‘The worst year since the Norway debacle’, or ‘the worst since a biliary tract injury made Eden take his eye off Suez’. I have even heard myself saying versions of it: ‘2020 has been the worst year since Germany found a gap in the Maginot Line at the Ardennes.’ Fearing this sounded too highbrow, I have now changed tack. ‘The worst since 1975, when no Cliff Richard single made the charts.’ But all these comparisons ignore the simple reality that the important events of our lives occur in private space. For me, 2020 is the worst year since 2018, when my father died.

I lost a friend this month. The cycle lane in Kensington kept me safe mornings and evenings, but the council seem to have panicked after a complaint from Nigel Havers, and they tore it out. As always, Twitter has the best response — ‘If loving bollards is wrong, I don’t wanna be right,’ wrote a commuting cyclist called Bob From Accounts. This perfectly sums up my own ideology in a city where car use has gone up as ridiculously as one of Patrick Vallance’s Sunday afternoon graphs.

I recently started subscribing to *The Spectator*, figuring that at the age of 55 I could achieve greater calmness of spirit by sponsoring others to be angry on my behalf. Week after week I have thumbed through the pages looking for the article that argues for cycle lanes to be built by the thousand, and it has been conspicuously absent. So it is down to me, parachuted in to write a diary, to say this as clearly as I can: cycling is right-wing. When you buy a bike you are throwing off the shackles of the state. No number plate, no insurance, no compulsory helmet. Also, no sat nav giving you directions through someone’s back garden to avoid the jam on the A404. In fact no jam — today or tomorrow! You are opting for efficiency above all. People think cycling is left-wing because a lot of left-wing people do it, such as Jeremy Corbyn. But cycling is not worthy, it is cheeky. A cyclist may have watched all 29 series of *Top Gear*, yet opted for a vehicle costing less than £200. Cyclists are acting out of primal selfishness — we want to travel quickly and keep fit. If people cycled ‘to save the planet’, that would be left-wing. But in my experience most of us do it to save ourselves.

With my teenage daughters effectively grounded — a microbe managing what I would never even dare to try — my wife and I have been thrown back to 1970s parenting. Come Saturday, we pull old board games from the cupboard and yell: ‘Let’s try this!’ So here we are, in the 21st century, unpacking actual chessboards and Scrabble sets (the smartphone version of Scrabble is the best argument yet against the internet existing at all). We play frantically and then fall out over someone having been in check for five minutes without noticing, or whether ‘Xi’ is a word. We have also played cards. We learned how to play poker because I thought my daughters could use lockdown to train as professionals. But it’s hard to enjoy poker without the risk of losing your house, so we canned that. Still, what with Rummy, Happy Families and the strangely named card game Big Tonka, we have a full set of analogue activities. And I have to be honest and say the time spent together is precious. Yet Covid has a knack of spoiling everything. I saw experts on the government’s Sage committee were recently saying that it would be unwise to play card and board games when families meet at Christmas: ‘Quizzes would be better.’ The printable part of my response: when the vaccine comes I want it in both arms and both legs.



Last orders

The new tier restrictions have made life difficult for pubs. How many are closed?

- According to the British Beer and Pub Association, 16,500 of England’s 37,000 pubs have had to close for everything except takeaway owing to their being in Tier 3 areas.
- Of the 21,000 pubs in Tier 2 areas, 14,000 have had to remain closed because they are unviable if they can’t serve drinkers without also serving a substantial meal.
- That leaves 732 pubs in Tier 1 areas which can open more or less as normal.
- The number of pubs has fallen by 22 per cent this century. However, 2019 saw the first year-on-year rise, with a net gain of 320 pubs across the country.

Payback – or not

Banks were reported to be trying to end a voluntary agreement made last year to refund more victims of ‘push-payment’ fraud, whereby customers are tricked into making a payment to fraudsters. Did the agreement actually result in more people being refunded — or dissuade fraudsters?

2018| 2019

No. of payments | **123,657** | **185,449**

Amount lost | **£354m** | **£456m**

Amount refunded | **£83m** | **£116m**

Off the scale

Bob Dylan sold his back catalogue of 600 songs to Universal Music for a reported \$300 million. Which songs have earned the most royalties in history?

‘Happy Birthday’ (Patty Hill and Mildred J. Hill) | **£37m**

‘White Christmas’ (Irving Berlin) | **£27m**

‘You’ve Lost that Loving Feeling’ (Barry Mann, Cynthia Weil, Phil Spector) | **£24m**

‘Yesterday’ (Paul McCartney) | **£23m**

‘Unchained Melody’ (Alex North and Hy Zaret) | **£21m**

Family matters

What is often claimed to be Britain’s largest household, Sue and Noel Radford of Morecambe, their 19 children and one grandchild, were reported to be self-isolating after one tested positive for Covid. How common are large families?

— In 2019 the ONS counted 597,000 households of six people or more — up from 469,000 20 years ago.

— The government’s biggest nightmare would be that the Radfords took advantage of the three-household rule to spend Christmas with the Bretts of Dingwall (all 13 of them) and the Lewises of Bournemouth (again, 13 of them) for a legal gathering of 48.

Plato beats the pundit



Presenter Nick Robinson has been reflecting on the political interview. He contrasts his interviews with scientists about Covid with those with politicians about policy, and thinks that it is the politicians' fault that he never gets very far with them. It seems not to have crossed his mind that it might be his. Perhaps Plato (d. 348 bc) can help. Plato's dialogues are the first examples the West has of extended discussions between interested parties on big topics — what we mean by justice, knowledge, goodness and so on. Socrates is at the centre of most of them, and is presented as a most delightful interlocutor — kindly, encouraging, gently ironic, rarely (one senses) even raising his voice, let alone hectoring his fellows. His key characteristic is his ability to engage them in the topic even though he spends most of the time showing that what they think about it is misguided. He does this by listening carefully to what they say and getting them to see for themselves, under questioning, that they need to think again — which they proceed to do, to everyone's benefit. As he says to one participant: 'I am questioning you not out of personal animosity but simply to help the discussion to progress coherently. That will prevent us from getting into the habit of guessing at one another's views and anticipating what might be said, instead of allowing you to develop your own argument as you wish from your own assumptions.' Plato's dialogues are, of course, a set-up, but one with a purpose: to show just how problematic the big questions are, yet how, under Socrates' guidance, even if no conclusions are reached, everyone ends up understanding more clearly the true nature of the issues at hand. But Nick Robinson's abrupt, confrontational approach, while it may sound so excitingly gritty, will never draw his interviewee into productive or enlightening responses, let alone dialogue.

Any fool can ask 'tough' questions. It takes real skill, however, to elicit significant and revealing answers. It is a skill in which Nick is singularly deficient. He just wants to 'win'. Thereby, listeners lose.

. Peter Jones

LETTERS



Eton mess

Sir: As much as I am a great admirer of Charles Moore, as a former Eton master and head of the Perspectives lecture series (over which Will Knowland has been dismissed), I must disagree with his analysis (‘The Spectator’s Notes’, 5 December). The format of the lecture series is designed for individual speakers to defend an academic point of view on a controversial topic, which is then discussed in class. Perhaps Mr Knowland’s lecture contained certain errors, but that should not have constituted a reason to discipline him. The initial decision not to allow the lecture to be used was lamentable.

The headmaster has the right to exert discipline within the school, and masters must do anything he reasonably requests of them. I am not a lawyer, but it seems to me that the further request to remove the lecture from Mr Knowland’s YouTube channel was not reasonable. The insufficiency of Eton’s case that this is purely a matter of disobedience is rendered more powerful by the revelation that Eton’s own working group on this matter found that the use of the lecture on one occasion alone would have constituted grounds for ‘gross misconduct’. Indeed, the Provost’s second intervention in the public debate confirmed that the content of the lecture itself was a salient factor.

It is regrettable that the leadership of the school saw fit to escalate this to the level of taking legal advice. The school stands to lose an outstanding teacher.

I hope Eton’s leadership does not feel that the pressure to conform to current equality and inclusion orthodoxies should trump 500 years of academic integrity at an institution which holds a moral duty to teach its pupils to think critically. Eton should pride itself on a courageous willingness to stand in contrast to the zeitgeist. At present, it seems it is failing.

Gavin A.J. Rice

Eton College Master, 2013-18

London SW1V

The praise-and-blame game

Sir: I think there is another Sturgeon paradox (‘Queen of Scots’, 5 December): that getting independence might actually damage her modus operandi. Currently she is able to pin anything which goes wrong on Westminster and take anything which goes right for herself. Lower prevalence of coronavirus in Scotland? Well, that’s because of Scotland’s control over health policy. What about the higher Covid death rate in Scotland then? Well, that’s because Scotland doesn’t have enough control over health policy. The sharing of powers allows blame and praise to be attributed as it suits. Yet only Sturgeon and the Nationalists can play this game. If the Unionists did so it would play straight into Sturgeon’s hands: ‘The Westminster elite are blaming us for their mistakes.’ This tactic is part of what has enabled the independence cause to surge so swiftly these past few years. But if Sturgeon gets what she wants, the game’s over. With independence, that narrative no longer works. Any blame would fall squarely on her shoulders.

George Campkin

Seaview, Isle of Wight

I blame Boris

Sir: I fear Douglas Murray is wrong to just blame China (‘China needs to make reparations’, 5 December). It wasn’t the virus that removed our liberty while destroying our economy, culture and education system. This time last year I was actively campaigning for this government to be elected because I thought Johnson was the only politician with the courage to lead the country the way it needed to be. I can assure Melissa Kite I know a lot of people who feel as embarrassed as she does (‘Real Life’, 5 December), and as betrayed as I do.

John Harris

Chelmsford, Essex

Why rugby league wins

Sir: Roger Alton describes a number of rule changes he’d like rugby union to embrace to reduce reliance on kicking and stifling forward play (‘Rugby must try harder’, 5 December). If he wants to see the ball in play more and the backs throwing it around with tremendous skill, then he should watch rugby league. The recent Super League Grand Final was an unbelievable 80 minutes of drama and entertainment. I say this despite my team losing the contest in the last second of the game.

David James Pilkington

London SE1

Fungi theory

Sir: As a Loughborough student, I’d like to thank Rod Liddle for bringing to my attention Dr Lenka Vrablikova’s lecture on mushroom intersectionality, which had been due to take place here last month (‘The march of the fascist mushrooms’, 21 November). Curious to see how my tuition fee is spent, I attended the online talk. Dr Vrablikova suggested that ‘mushroom-phobic’ English culture looks upon the ‘mushroom-philic’ cultures of eastern Europe with suspicion. This, she thinks, led to Brexit. Besides being obviously untrue, her talk was symptomatic of two things. Firstly, of an intellectual class that has never truly come to terms with what happened in 2016; and, secondly, of a ‘clickbait’ model of academia which rewards some of the silliest research proposals with funding.

Thomas Griffiths,

Loughborough

Robins across the pond

Sir: I enjoyed John Sturgis’s Notes On... robins (28 November) but surely Batman’s Robin is named after the American bird of that name, which is not only a different species to our own, but belongs to a completely different taxonomic family? A similar mix-up occurred in the original *Mary Poppins* film when, in spite of its London setting, the robin perched on Julie Andrews’s hand to illustrate a line in the song ‘A Spoonful of Sugar’ is clearly *Turdus migratorius*, not *Erithacus rubecula*. To be fair, the American robin was likely named after the European, because it does at least have a red breast.

Matthew Pickhaver

Briston, Norfolk

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Deal or no deal?



When a deadline is missed for Brexit negotiations, it is tempting to think there will be another chance to keep talks going. Last week, the UK and the EU agreed that things needed to be wrapped up by Sunday night or Monday afternoon at the latest. The thinking was that if a deal was not done by then, the return of the Internal Market Bill to the Commons would scupper negotiations. But Monday afternoon passed with no agreement. The two sides now admit that the only real deadline is the end of the transition period on 31 December.

The talks are currently in a state of suspended animation. After nine months, the sticking points are the same three issues: the so-called level playing field, fish and governance. Boris Johnson and Ursula von der Leyen each think the other wants a deal. The hope is that their face-to-face meeting can encourage some creativity and give the negotiators something to work with. I understand that their phone calls have been cordial but haven't produced any new ideas about how the log jam might be broken.

In some ways this all seems like a repeat of October last year. Then, the negotiations were making no progress, and a no-deal Brexit seemed inevitable. Johnson went to meet the then Irish Taoiseach Leo Varadkar. There was general pessimism in Downing Street about how likely the meeting was to yield anything. Yet against expectations the two leaders managed, during a walk in the woods, to pave the way for an agreement.

There are two significant differences this time, though. The first is that back then only Ireland was directly affected by the issues under discussion. This meant that if the Irish were happy, the rest of the EU would be too. Now, most of the EU's 27 member states have interests at stake. Von der Leyen will be acutely aware that she is speaking on behalf of 27 countries given France's public threat to veto any deal it doesn't like.

The second is the parliamentary situation. In October 2019, Boris Johnson led a minority government. There was an anti-no-deal majority in the House of Commons and so his options were limited. This time, he has an 80-seat majority and Tory MPs are solidly behind his negotiating strategy. In parliamentary terms, he doesn't need a deal the way he did last year.

But if Johnson no longer needs a deal, he would still prefer one. An agreement — albeit one consistent with his red lines — would make his life simpler. There would be less disruption and it would free him up to concentrate on his domestic agenda. By contrast, a no-deal Brexit would leave the British state facing a huge logistical challenge which, considering how poorly it has coped with Covid, is politically risky. In addition, the SNP would seize on the disruption to advance their cause of Scottish independence.

One danger of no deal has been removed this week. The agreement between the UK and the EU on the implementation of the Northern Ireland protocol, and the subsequent dropping of the controversial clauses of the Internal Market Bill, means that no deal won't put the UK on a collision course with the incoming US administration. Joe Biden has made it clear that he would not approve of any unilateral UK rewriting of the Northern Ireland protocol.

Johnson also knows that if there's no agreement, there will be a blame game and he wants to be able to say that he tried, and tried hard, for a deal. Indeed, this is vital if he is to maintain public support. At the same time, the EU negotiators don't want to be the ones to quit the talks. Their decision to stay at the table even when the UK was threatening to break international obligations under the withdrawal agreement in a 'specific and limited way' shows how determined they are not to be seen as the side that walked away. This dynamic means that neither Johnson nor von der Leyen will want to be the first to refuse further talks. So their meetings may go on more in hope than expectation.

If the transition periods ends without a deal on 31 December, some believe that this would just mark the continuation of the negotiations by other means. President Macron is attracted to this idea — let the British stew for a few months in the chaos of a no-deal Brexit until they come back to the table in a more accommodating mood. This, though, is a fundamental misreading of the situation. The acrimony that would accompany no deal would make it hard for the talks to resume anytime soon. Johnson would also know that returning to negotiations to accept the same, or worse, terms after a period of no deal would break him politically. However difficult things were, he would have to keep going. At the same time, trading on WTO terms — even for a few months — would change the nature of negotiations. Should the aim of the two sides be the complete elimination of tariffs? Or might a bare-bones agreement leave tariffs in places on certain goods or agricultural products?

Whatever happens between now and the end of the year, the European question — or the British question, depending on how you look at it — isn't going to go away. Leaving does not solve all the difficulties of the UK-EU relationship. The EU is reluctant to have such a significant economy just off its coast but outside of its regulatory orbit. The long-running argument about the level playing field is all about an EU desire to prevent the UK from having tariff-free trade with the EU while not following the same rules and standards as members of the bloc.

In part, this is based on a European suspicion that Britain is about to turn into Singapore-on-Thames. That is highly unlikely; even with a Tory majority of 80, for example, this country wouldn't repeal its Sunday trading laws. But even if a deal can be signed, it won't be the end of the argument. Every time the UK does something differently, there will be cries in the EU that Brussels should seek to impose tariffs.



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In defence of Millwall fans



It is an enormous shame that the Millwall fans who booed their players for ‘taking a knee’ in support of Black Lives Matter last week were not better acquainted with one of the British BLM leaders, Sasha Johnson — they might have taken a knee themselves out of admiration. In August Ms Johnson tweeted: ‘The white man will not be our equal but our slave.’ If there is one thing Millwall supporters respect it’s aspiration, and Ms Johnson has that in abundance. I am sure the FA, the English Football League, and indeed the Millwall club board, who condemned the booing, all wish Sasha the best of luck in her exciting project.

One voice should not be allowed to demean an entire movement, of course. The trouble is — and it is so tiresome to have to point this out every time the issue is raised — Ms Johnson’s views are not especially extreme in a foul organisation that wishes to dismantle capitalism and the family. Taking a knee signals support for the organisation, not for racial equality, and that is the end of the story. The football authorities and the broadcasters were very clear about this when football resumed in June after lockdown. Players would be asked to take a knee in support of Black Lives Matter, upper case, and the point was reinforced by players, commentators and pundits wearing Black Lives Matter badges. So Millwall’s assertion that taking a knee was in no way an endorsement of BLM’s political objectives, but simply a gesture in support of love, peace and happiness among all peoples, is deceitful, cowardly and ludicrous. It is like stretching out your right arm, shouting ‘Sieg Heil!’ and then telling onlookers: ‘It’s just a gesture — nothing to do with old Adolf, mate.’

Such a confected furore whipped up by the bed-wetting, obsessive liberal left and their useful halfwits in the media: Barney Ronay, Adrian Durham, the perennially smug Lineker. I knew there would be booing the minute I heard fans would be allowed into the fixture. Of course they would boo. They hate BLM and on that issue I’m with them. They have no problem with football’s Kick It Out campaign, which is genuinely and simply anti-racist. They have no problem whatsoever with black players and are delighted to vote a Muslim Comorian, Nadjim Abdou, player of the year twice. We had black players at Millwall long before most clubs, and black supporters on the terraces — including one or two very useful members of our highly regarded and psycho-pathically vicious ‘firm’ — back when *Guardian* editorial meetings were whiter than a Ku Klux Klan dinner dance. So cut out the hand-wringing, the lectures and the cant. Millwall fans booed the taking-a-knee business because they have no more time for BLM than they do for meaningless corporate virtue-signalling and they resent the fascistic insistence that everyone must bow down — literally, these days — before the empty and deluded attitudinising of the woke left.

Four hours before kick-off on Saturday I read the following from a Millwall fan on the club’s largest supporters’ online forum. (If you are a *Guardian* reader I assume you think I’m about to translate the comments from the original Neanderthal grunts. No. Really, I don’t need to.) The poster addressed his remarks: ‘FAO: The Players.’ It had been made clear that Millwall players would take a knee and this troubled the supporter — who, like me, knew there would be booing and thus trouble. (Frankly, how the idiots who run the club didn’t work it out is an eternal mystery, not least because the press officer never answers his phone.) Anyway, this particular fan implored the players not to take the knee and added:

The whole BLM movement is insulting to many because it seeks to destroy our country’s values. I don’t mean nationalism or jingoism but the values that unite people across the political spectrum. A belief in the rule of law, free speech, respect for others and the social justice that many of our forebears had to fight for in the trade union movement.

Your excuse for supporting this movement is an insult to our intelligence and an overtly political statement. It’s particularly damaging at this time when so many fans are suffering financial hardship that you couldn’t even begin to understand. By supporting BLM you are not healing divisions but creating them. I fear that your actions will cause not just a division between players and fans but a gulf of betrayal that will never be bridged.

If you want to campaign against discrimination then please do so, but supporting BLM is the wrong way to do it.

That is why the fans booed. Not because they are racists. It is why the fans booed at Colchester United too. And at West Ham, our despised rivals. It is why there was widespread booing at one of the first American ‘soccer’ games to which fans were admitted after lockdown in July, between FC Dallas and Nashville SC. It is quite possibly why the Premier League and the broadcasters quietly ditched their adherence when someone with half a brain cell pointed out what BLM stands for. It is why other clubs, such as QPR, Wigan Athletic and Middlesbrough, decided to stop taking the knee, before they were dragooned back into it. This is the thing: the hypocrisy of it all — the footballing authorities who themselves, rightly, ditched BLM becoming sanctimonious about fans booing a gesture in support of BLM.

What do the British people think? An opinion poll for Mail Online in July found that 67 per cent supported Boris Johnson’s decision not to take a knee. Only 13 per cent thought he was wrong. And there you have our problem. On this issue, as on so many, we are dictated to by the shrieking 13 per cent.



“Before we go any further, I’ll need you to fill in this track-and-trace form.”

No one wins in the race race



After the explosion of international self-abasement over George Floyd’s killing in Minneapolis, much theatrical soul-searching ensued. So your basic man or woman on the street might have reason to puzzle why it is that in the wake of all this hyper-awareness about race (which the left simultaneously instructs us both does not exist and explains everything), relations between the hues seem only to decay.

In order to redress ‘structural racism’, the state of Oregon (impressively still extant, given the determination of both nature and Portland’s Antifa activists to burn it down) has reserved \$62 million, out of a total Covid relief fund of \$200 million, for black people. Black individuals who’ve suffered losses from government shutdowns can apply for grants of up to \$3,000 per family, while black-owned businesses struggling during the pandemic can qualify for relief up to \$100,000.

If you’re familiar with America’s north-western demographics, the first peculiarity that leaps from this weighted state benevolence is its disproportion. This is Oregon. What black people? Only 2.9 per cent of Oregonians are black. Yet close to a third of the relief fund is to be administered exclusively to this tiny, sanctified sliver of the population. Per capita, black applicants are bequeathed more than ten times the financial assistance as residents of other races. Isn’t that ‘structural racism’? Furthermore, by fostering resentment in the unanointed, this is a dubious formula for teaching everyone to get along.

Likewise problematic is the fact that 13.3 per cent of the state is Latino. Though more than four times more populous than black residents, Hispanic Oregonians don’t qualify for ‘The Oregon Cares Fund for Black Relief and Resiliency’ — as Maria Garcia, owner of Portland’s Revolución Coffee House, has discovered. Although her profits have withered from coronavirus restrictions, Ms Garcia’s application to the Cares Fund was declined because ‘0 per cent of its owners identify as Black’. The café owner is now suing in federal court, arguing that a blacks-only fund violates the 14th Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause.

You’d think that the bald unconstitutionality of apportioning emergency assistance on the basis of race would be cut and dried. Unfortunately, previous Supreme Court rulings — permitting race-based admissions to promote diversity in education and narrowly allowing the use of racial preferences in the awarding of state and federal contracts — have muddied what should have remained clear constitutional waters. In recent decades, the whole foundational American principle of equality under the law has been eroded. So the US now has Bad Racism and Good Racism.

Of course, in the UK, the very expression ‘equality under the law’ draws a stupefied blank. In defiance of this fusty notion that laws should apply without fear or favour to everybody, Britain now preciously ring-fences ‘protected characteristics’ — which means that a completely different set of laws applies to one group as opposed to another. Legally, white straight men live in another country.

This disconcerting entrenchment of racial factionalism as a solution to racial factionalism has also been on display in the coverage of Joe Biden’s appointments-to-be, starting first and foremost with his choice of vice president. The media overwhelmingly celebrated Kamala Harris not for her accomplishments or her politics, but for her sex and race. Biden himself steered the country in an identity-politics direction immediately after he was nominated by declaring that the primary qualification of his VP would be XX chromosomes. Given the fevered Floydian social atmosphere this summer, his subsequent obligation to choose not only a woman but a woman who ‘identifies as black’ was a foregone conclusion from the off.

Post-election, Biden’s picks for cabinet and staff have been scrutinised by media commentators almost solely in accordance with their ‘diversity’: the number of blacks, women, Latinos, gays, etc, and broadcasters keep running tallies of which team is winning. As a stray example among dozens, the *Guardian* ran a headline in mid-November: ‘Biden’s first staff appointments include five women and four people of colour.’ Think-tank Brookings has posted pie charts of previous administrations’ appointees (white, black, Asian, Hispanic, Indian and Arab), the better to keep track of whether Biden will beat his predecessors in the race race. Last week, the NAACP and black Congressional leaders voiced their disappointment that only one of the eight cabinet appointees whom Biden had so far announced was black — despite the fact that black Americans constitute just about exactly one-eighth of the population (if we’re going to be that way — and it seems we are). When Biden’s picks are admired by the *New York Times* or CNN, they are lauded almost exclusively in terms of his diversity score card.

Broadly, yes, it’s healthy for the government of a racially various country to itself be racially various. And I’m in no position to judge whether any of Biden’s choices for powerful posts who improve his administration’s appearance on a literally cosmetic level are anything other than highly qualified for their jobs. But I am in a position to despair when journalistic colleagues commend these often personally and professionally impressive people purely on the basis of sex or race. Were I appointed deputy chief of staff, I’d be irked to be regarded as merely one more stroke in the female column. Surely distinguished black appointees don’t appreciate being mere strokes in a column, either.

For any institution, diversity is necessarily a penultimate goal. Sitting around being diverse accomplishes nothing. What matters most is how Biden’s cabinet members further the larger goals of his administration.

We’re stuck in a reductive way of thinking that plonks us in camps pitted against other camps, and this hiving off into teams in competition for zero-sum resources — be they Covid compensation funds or cabinet appointments — is only getting worse. Races, sexes, sexual identity cadres and the disabled are being incentivised to operate like trade unions or lobbying factions, whose interests are mutually exclusive and whose relations are therefore, if you will, *structurally* hostile. We’ve grown so numbly accustomed to raising category over character that we’re forgetting how depressingly regressive this primitive tribal mindset is.

The importance of giving offence



As dons at Cambridge vote on a new protocol on constraints to free speech, we mark this month the 500th anniversary of the public burning of Martin Luther’s books outside the west door of Great St Mary’s, the university church at Cambridge.

After the 1517 publication of his famous 95 Theses, raging against the Church’s sale of ‘indulgences’ that purported to pardon sin in exchange for money, Luther had been denounced by Pope Leo X in a papal Bull. This accused him of (among other things) saying things that were ‘offensive to pious ears’. Luther then burned the papal Bull on 10 December 1520, giving further offence. He was excommunicated the following year.

Make no bones about it: Martin Luther intended to offend. He was not just advancing a reasoned case against Catholic practice — though he did — but also turning his protest into a campaign that would catch fire. It would have been entirely possible for the professor of moral theology at the University of Wittenberg to have made his arguments with quiet courtesy, ruffling a few episcopal feathers but attracting no public interest. But he wanted to stir things up.

Luther could (in the language now recommended to Cambridge dons 500 years later) have worded his case with ‘respect’ towards opponents. The Wittenberg professor made no such concession. His language is neither respectful nor polite, nor even tolerant. In Thesis 10 he accused priests of acting ‘ignorantly and wickedly’. In his 28th thesis he accused priests who sold indulgences of ‘greed and avarice’. Thesis 32 claims that such priests face eternal damnation. Attempting to buy divine pardon for money (he says in Thesis 45) will earn ‘God’s wrath’. They are ‘the enemies of Christ’, he adds in Thesis 53. ‘Let him who speaks against [my] truth concerning papal indulgences’ (Thesis 71) ‘be anathema and accursed’. Luther goes on (Thesis 72) to accuse these preachers of ‘lust and licence’. To believe their priestly teachings (Thesis 75) ‘is madness’.

And so on. No need to labour the point. This was a man intent on disrespect. By insulting church practice, by (indirectly) implicating the Pope, and by lashing out against not just a theological claim, but against the virtue, good faith and probity of those priests who made it, the aim was to insult, incite and outrage. He meant to provoke churchmen who took a different view. The fury he sparked was not a collateral consequence of the argument he made, it was central to his purpose. Luther was not even ‘tolerant’ (the word preferred by the dons campaigning against the censorship that ‘respectful’ implies). He was angry. Angry not only with an idea, but with the individuals who promoted it. He meant to wound them personally.

Was this simply because Luther was vindictive by nature? Absolutely not. We’ve no window into his nature, but it is plain to scholars of his era that he had wanted to start a popular movement for reform. Hence his fiery language, his personal indictments, his burning of the Papal Bull. This was a man with a strong argument, passionately held, and a canny sense of how to set his cause alight. By his intemperate, intolerant, dis-respectful language, Martin Luther lit the fuse that led to a conflagration in European theology: the Reformation was surely one of the most significant events in the history of our continent. And it began, as it had to, with language that in the words of the Pope was ‘offensive to pious ears’.

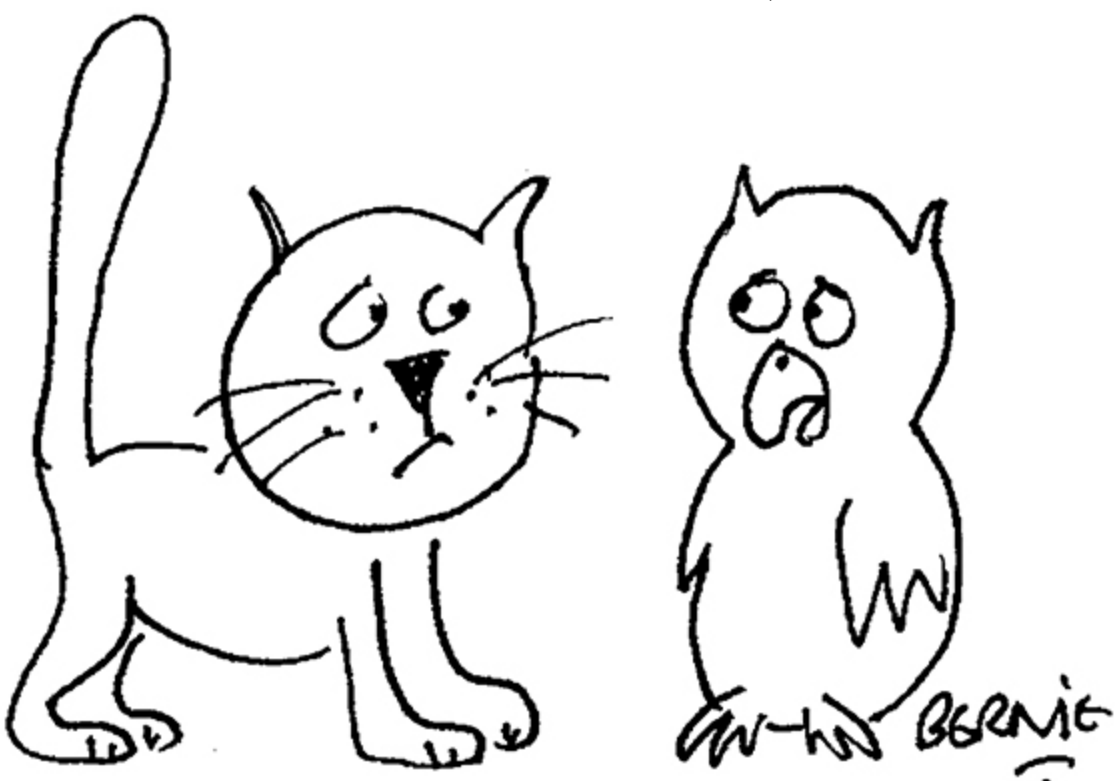
The battle of ideas, were it no more than a battle of ideas, could perhaps have been conducted throughout human history with unfailing respect, tolerance and civility. On a more cerebral planet, no voice might ever need to be raised. But on this planet battles of ideas are shot through — you may even say ‘polluted’ — by other forces, other motives, other power struggles. Sometimes the ideas are little more than hostages, proxies, in deeper and more covert battles. Sometimes the ideas do matter, but they come bearing weapons that are not intellectual.

Prominent among what can contaminate a superficially simple battle of ideas is the issue of authority. For centuries the Church was able to frighten and coerce and (more insidiously) command a kind of awe that discouraged even private dissent or question. I sense that among many of its followers Islam still does the same today. Among Jewish denominations, the ultra-Orthodox seem to exert this power over followers. Unthinking deference to Catholic teaching is fading, but still evident in parts of the world.

A dominating religion is but one example of doctrinal authority that may not at first be easy to confront head-on. But it can be twitted. Insult and abuse, personal invective, scorn and ridicule are vastly important among the means of obliquely challenging a ruling dispensation, and loosening its command around the edges. Voltaire knew that. John Wilkes too. Likewise (say) Christopher Hitchens. Rob these men — or rob today’s leading cartoonists — of their impudence and you rob them of their agency.

Allied to authority is intimidation. In ages like ours, certain dominating ideas can exert a similar power to chill potential dissent through something close to fear. The wilder extreme of the ‘trans’ movement (and I do mean *movement*, not trans people, for whose thoughts and feelings nobody can be spokesman) has had success through social media in frightening off all but the brave from publicly questioning some of its claims. One of the ways it does this is through the passive-aggressive means of taking offence — like the ‘pious ears’ offended by Luther. But if we are to challenge folly we must needs offend it: challenge will be taken as disrespect, discourtesy, ‘intolerance’. So be it.

We who believe in free speech will probably win the battle for the right not to ‘respect’ some opinions or those who hold them. But let’s not settle for compromises like ‘tolerance’ or ‘courtesy’. Luther showed neither. Had he had better manners, we’d never have heard of him.



“It wasn’t until lockdown that I realised how little we have in common.”

The business world has many shades between hero and villain



Separating heroes from villains in the great retail survival struggle is like spotting bent coppers in *Line of Duty* — whose sixth series, I’m pleased to report, has just finished filming. The plot just keeps twisting. Sir Philip Green, as I said last week, is seen as an irredeemable baddie; and most commentators (though not usually me) put sportswear tycoon Mike Ashley in a similar category, as an opportunist with a track record as a harsh employer. But now here he is, trying through his company Frasers Group to launch a last-ditch rescue for Debenhams, despite having lost £150 million last year in previous pursuit of the department store chain.

He can’t save all 124 shops and 12,000 jobs — but even saving half or a third of them would be remarkable. The point about Ashley is that he has no interest in cashing out, and a burning urge to prove his critics wrong. In the best on-screen drama, the have-a-go maverick always beats the odds: let’s see if Ashley can defy today’s high-street reality.

Then again, there’s a division between big retailers that have flourished this year and opted to return business-rate reliefs to the Treasury, and those that haven’t. The first category includes Tesco, paying back half a billion, the discounters Aldi and Lidl at £100 million each, and Pets at Home (beneficiary of the lockdown puppy boom) at £29 million. On the other side, or still thinking about it, are Marks & Spencer and the John Lewis Partnership, which includes Waitrose — both saying that strong food sales have merely offset damage on the non-food side — as well as the Co-op, arguably our most community-minded retailer.

Should we think badly of those who cling to windfalls they might not have needed? That’s a hot question in a year in which the Chancellor has sprayed money in many directions and taxpayers would clearly wish him to recoup any that was wasted. But my answer goes in a different direction: that government should make this episode a reason to reform the whole business-rate system as a smart catalyst for town-centre revival — rather than reverting to treating it, as in the past, as a £30 billion source of easy pickings.

Backroom billionaire

The lesson of this column so far is that business has many shades between hero and villain — and that those who make headlines by owning shopfronts loom largest in our vision. But this week saw the announced retirement of a backroom billionaire who deserves at least a footnote. Ivan Glasenberg is stepping down after 18 years as chief executive of the Swiss-based miner and commodity trader Glencore — a giant player in zinc, copper, coal and oil and one of two powerful but low-profile business empires (the other is Trafigura) that descend from the activities of the late Marc Rich, the so-called godfather of global commodity trading, whose misdeeds were pardoned by Bill Clinton. If it’s moral dilemmas you seek, take a closer look at that sector.

Grand technocrat

I once spent an amusing evening in the company of Valéry Giscard d’Estaing. His English was impeccable but his pronunciation would have won an audition for ‘*Allo!*’ ‘*Allo!*’ — as he explained, his Balliol-educated father told him to master our language but not demean himself by imitating our accent. Political detractors mocked him for that kind of hauteur, but it was delivered with good humour. When I asked him whether he thought of himself as ‘a democrat or a technocrat’, he moved up another gear. ‘I have recently studied the whole of world history, again — and have concluded that the most progressive periods of government occurred when wise, experienced leaders were given long terms of office and left to get on with governing.’

He was of course referring chiefly to his own seven-year presidency of France, in which it’s fair to say he achieved two great modernisations that stand its economy in good stead to this day. The first was to advance the nuclear power programme which still provides some 70 per cent of the country’s electricity, freeing it from reliance on imported carbon fuels. The second was to champion the development of a transformative network of *trains à grande vitesse*. Both were pushed forward with near-zero public consultation — so could never have happened in the UK, where decade after decade we pay the price, in halted or never-started infrastructure schemes, for asking our citizens what they think they want.

Bureaucratic zealots

Ampleforth College, the Roman Catholic public school in North Yorkshire, has been ‘put on death row’ — says Charles Moore in the *Daily Telegraph* — by a restriction order from the Department for Education preventing it from admitting new pupils. I cannot improve on Charles’s fair summary of the school’s past ‘safeguarding’ lapses, nor his magisterial demolition of the DfE’s ideologically driven case. But living as I do three miles from the Ampleforth campus, let me urge secretary of state Gavin Williamson to count the potential economic cost of his department’s intervention.

Seen as a business, Ampleforth has already responded to regulatory criticism by changing its senior management and non-executive board. It has maintained a brand that wins loyalty from current parent-customers as well as rising numbers of applicants to become new ones. It is the largest private-sector employer (400 on the payroll) in a rural district whose other main sources of work are farming and hospitality. Its £15 million of annual revenues include £4 million from overseas parents and visitors — an example of education as a UK export strength for the post-Brexit era. Do you really want to shut all that down, minister? In this locality we believe Ampleforth has already transformed itself while holding on to the best of what it had before. We pray for its deliverance from bureaucratic zealotry.

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THE WEEK IN 60 MINUTES

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Biden's burden

Will he build on Trump's foreign policy achievements – or destroy them?

DOMINIC GREEN



Joe Biden talks a lot about restoring America's standing in the world. But the truth is that if he now has the chance to reshape America's relationships for a new era, it's because Donald Trump has already done the awkward stuff. The question is: can Biden and his team swallow their collective pride and build on Trump's legacy, or will vanity and partisanship send the American Atlas tumbling to his knees?

Trump won the 2016 election by forcing the difficult questions on to the national agenda. In office, he developed an alternative to the spent consensus of the 1990s. Call it vulgar realism, the lowest common denominator of American interest. He named and shamed the self-dealing swamp creatures of Washington, DC: corrupt politicians, complacent bureaucrats, thoughtless think-tankers, the bottom-feeding media. He went after the follies and false friends with whom the Washington consensus, and especially the Obama administration, had tied America's hands and had set it stumbling towards second-rank status: open borders and outsourced factories, the Paris and Iran deals, the freeloaders in Nato and the fantasists at the UN.

Trump's critics have a point when they complain that he was better at breaking ties than making them. They are right to point out that if the boss had troubled to read the manual before yanking the levers of domestic policy-making, and if the staffing of the White House hadn't resembled a particularly savage episode of *The Apprentice*, he might have achieved more with less fuss.

Still, Trump cleared the ground. And he did more than lay the foundations of a new foreign policy. The outlines of the new architecture are already visible in the Pacific, and from the Himalayas to the Atlantic; they would surely have developed further had Trump won in November. As it is, the one-term outsider has arguably the most successful foreign policy record of any president since the end of the Cold War.

He avoided new wars in the Middle East and did his best to end the old ones. He took a tough line on Russia, but not so tough it pushed Russia into an alliance with China. He left the deeply flawed Iran deal and approached the Iranian regime with deterrence, not bribes. And he capitalised on luck and timing to facilitate the reconciliation of the Sunni Arab states and Israel. This breakthrough not only gives the job of confronting Iran to those to whom it matters most; it also contains the seeds of transformation in a Middle East where the oil is running out and Islamists are losing their appeal.

Above all, Trump did the world a favour by standing up to China's menace. He drew an explicit link between a US foreign policy that refused to take Chinese ambitions seriously and free-trade policies that encouraged the outsourcing of production eastwards.

Trump used America's purchasing habit as leverage against China. In December last year, after two years of tariffs and recriminations, the two countries concluded phase one of a new trade deal. China committed to buy more US exports, increase US companies' access to its financial services markets and expand its intellectual property law. Phase two was to include tougher issues such as technology transfers, industrial subsidies and data restriction. Deferred at the time, deferred again by the lost year of Covid, phase two may now be deferred permanently by the Biden administration.

'China is going to eat our lunch? Come on, man,' Biden said on the campaign trail in Iowa last year. 'They're not competition for us.' For Biden, the last of the Cold Warriors, the arc of history is perpetually bending towards American supremacy, the rest of the world perpetually progressing towards humanity's last leap: the end state of becoming American.

Trump barely talked about China's repression of the Uyghurs, and he recognised that while the US was still big enough to go it alone, it was no longer strong enough to force everyone else to come along. For Biden, however, America remains the paramount world power. The purpose of foreign policy is not the securing of domestic prosperity, but the export of the American way.

Trump objects to China as an economic and military threat. Biden's objections are moral. On free trade and outsourcing, as on the Iraq war, he was chronically in favour of it until he was against it. But Xi Jinping, he says, is a 'thug' who 'doesn't have a democratic bone in his body'. So Biden promises to hold a 'summit for democracy', to reinforce norms that no longer exist with states that no longer hold the balance of global power.

Under Biden, behind a screen of right-on rhetoric, America will step back from the confrontational policies that Trump's National Security Strategy of 2018 called 'strategic competition'. In a paper published in September last year, Jake Sullivan, Biden's pick for national security adviser, and his co-author, the Obama-era diplomat Kurt M. Campbell, argued that the US should seek a 'steady state of clear-eyed coexistence' with China through 'competition and cooperation'. A united democratic front under American leadership, Sullivan and Campbell believe, will force China to 'either curb its free-riding and start complying with trade rules, or accept less favourable terms from more than half of the global economy'. But not so unfavourable as to 'Balkanise' the lucrative 'flows of knowledge and talent' in 'the global technology ecosystem'.

The unipolar world is gone. Trump's policies are only one of the accelerants that hastened its departure. And the global technology system is already splitting into the lines of a new cold war: Google and Facebook vs Baidu and Weibo. In November, 15 Asian and Pacific countries signed a massive trade deal, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which binds American allies like Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and the Philippines into a low-tariff trade zone with China. This will speed up the concentration of Asian supply chains within the Pacific — and reduce America's influence over the Pacific democracies.

The Europeans are on board with Biden's cant about democracy. They correctly understand it as an effort to revive the liberal internationalist order on America's dime. Nostalgic and cynical, they want the American Atlas to do the heavy lifting. But Biden should not expect much in return.

Germany, the EU's largest economy, is actively soliciting business from China, pursuing its habitual energy diplomacy with Russia and deepening its relationship with Turkey. Unlike France and, after coercion, Britain, Germany refuses to rule out buying 5G from Huawei. In late November, while Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, was flattering Joe Biden as a 'committed transatlanticist', Angela Merkel was promising Xi that she would 'step up efforts' to conclude negotiations for an EU-China investment deal by the end of the year. Merkel also remains committed to the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia. A bipartisan consensus in the US Congress has ruled that this will damage Europe's energy independence.

American influence in Europe is further reduced by Brexit and Emmanuel Macron's neo-Gaullist 'France First' foreign policy. Before Brexit, Britain was a reliably pro-American voice in Europe. That made Britain an asset to the US, but an obstacle to the revival of Europe's political independence. That is why de Gaulle said 'Non' to Britain joining the Common Market in 1963 and 1967. It is also why Macron is pushing for a hard line in the Brexit negotiations: to finally dislodge American influence from the EU.

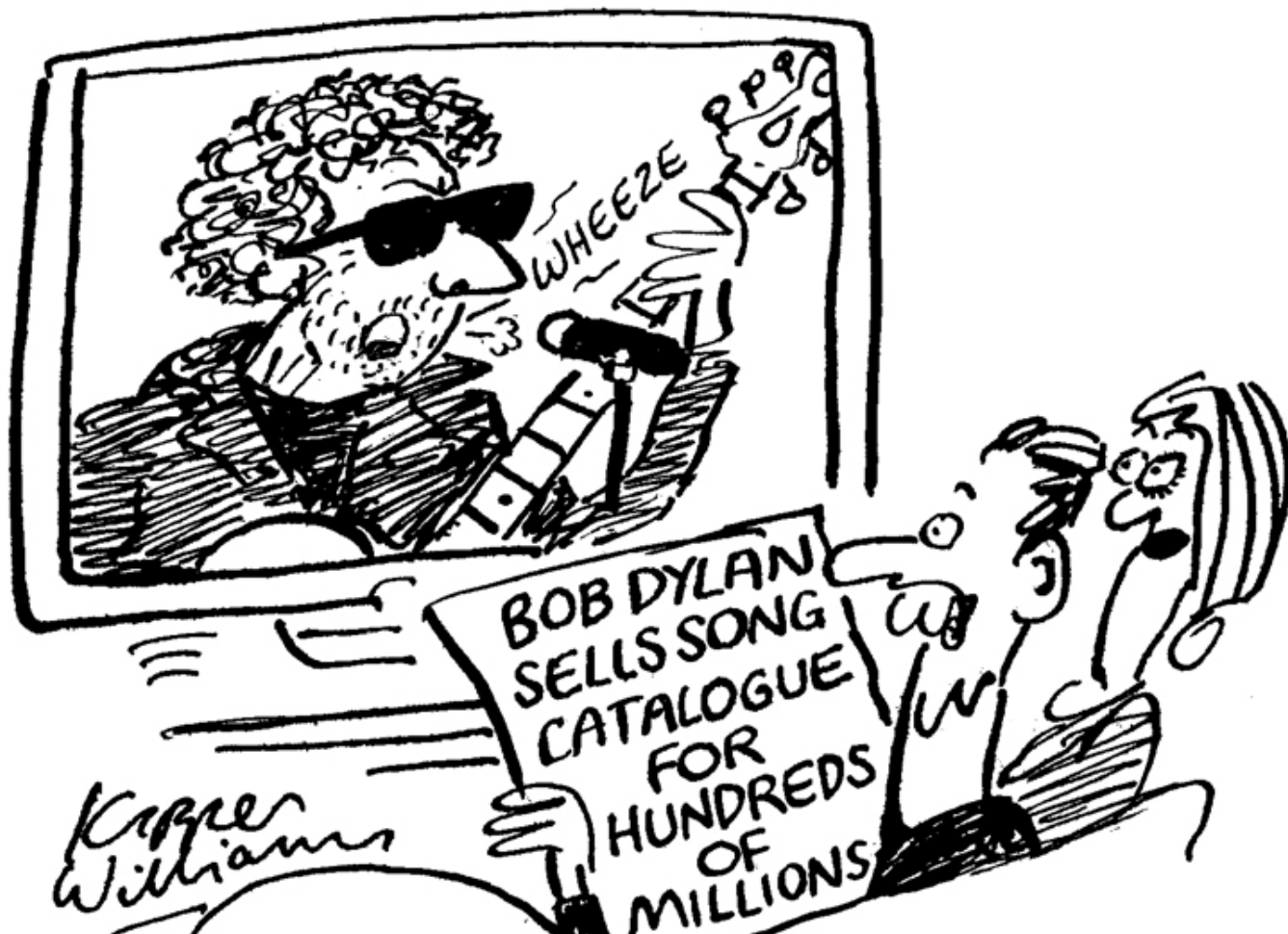
If Biden cannot revert to America's old alliances in Europe and Asia, and if, as he seems to intend, America will chase after the fool's errand of bringing back the Iran deal, what can he do? He can play to the domestic gallery. He can nominate a recently retired general, Lloyd Austin III, as the first black Secretary of Defense: a pleasing symbol which deflects questions about the role of his incoming Secretary of State, the very white Antony Blinken, in public-private 'consulting' for Pentagon contracts. He can announce the formation of the first all-female press team, an innovation which won't exactly force China to drop its claim to the Spratly Islands. He can promise labour unions and environmental lobbyists will be 'at the table' in future trade negotiations with Beijing. Good luck with that.

Jake Sullivan, Biden's choice for national security adviser, says he has been told to 'reimagine national security' to include 'the pandemic, the economic crisis, the climate crisis, technological disruptions, threats to democracy, racial injustice and inequality in all forms'. America 'cannot be a strong and effective actor in the world if we are not a strong and just society and an inclusive economy and a vibrant democracy at home'. A successful foreign policy, Sullivan reckons, means investing in 'inclusive' economic growth (a euphemism for race-based subsidies) and 'overcoming the scourge of systemic racism after 400 years'. This represents the total defeat of foreign-policy realism — the reality of the world outside America, even — by arrant wokery.

The virtue Sullivan intends to signal means nothing to China, other than confirming its impression of US decadence. It means less and less to America's allies, other than suggesting America will be even more unreliable in future, as it now has two foreign policies, each subject to the moods of the party in power, and each devoted primarily to annulling the other's achievements. It does, however, mean a lot to that unlikely domestic alliance: the foreign policy blob in Washington and the Democrats' activist base.

The Democratic elites have learned nothing and forgotten everything. They have substituted the failed exceptionalism of the 1990s and the War on Terror — America as the warrior of democracy and the world as its battlefield — with a more deluded exceptionalism: the world as a blank canvas for the projection of a campus drama of racial guilt-tripping and redistributive taxation.

Instead of building on Trump's achievements, the Biden administration is promising to erase every trace of the orange infamy, regardless of the cost. This is government by buzzword. As foreign policies go, it has as much chance of succeeding as a Black Lives Matter protest in Beijing.



"What a brilliant wheeze."

Custody battle

Juvenile offenders need safety, care and a proper education

CHARLIE TAYLOR



iStock

At the end of October, just before I started as HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, the inspectorate and Ofsted visited Rainsbrook Secure Training Centre near Rugby. Rainsbrook was built by the Blair government to house the increasing numbers of children imprisoned as a result of policing targets and tough-on-crime policies and it was one of four centres contracted out to private providers. The great hope was that these better-funded centres would provide a more humane alternative to Young Offender Institutions.

Rainsbrook holds children aged mostly 15 to 18, but on our inspection we discovered that for their first two weeks, new arrivals were being locked in their cells for 23½ hours a day. They had no contact with other children and little interaction with staff, who dropped food off at their doors and took them out for short solitary periods in the exercise yard.

The centre managers claimed they were responding to Covid-19 advice from local health officials, but they had not thought through the risk to children, or bothered to devise any alternative strategies. Little consideration had been given to any vulnerable children, including one boy assessed by the centre as being a suicide risk. Other institutions we have visited since April have, in contrast to Rainsbrook, grouped new arrivals into bubbles, even if this means some will have to spend slightly longer in quarantine.

The Youth Custody Service, whose job is to monitor the centre, either had not noticed or did not see anything wrong with keeping children as young as 15 in solitary confinement. Within days of our visit, the situation at Rainsbrook had been remedied, but by then this appalling and unnecessary arrangement had been in place for seven months.

Rainsbrook is funded at around £160,000 a year for each of the 84 places, but at the time of the visit it was only half full. Even so, the centre had acted on only one of the 20 recommendations from its previous inspection in February. The latest report identified the ‘failure of leadership to consistently ensure children’s safety and wellbeing and to fully address deficiencies in their care’.

Since its opening, Rainsbrook has had a troubled existence. In 2004, 15-year-old Gareth Myatt was killed by positional asphyxia while being restrained. He weighed less than seven stone and was under five feet tall. Reports in recent years have described inexperienced staff being unwilling to deal with bad behaviour, high levels of bullying and violence, and inadequate education.

Other Secure Training Centres have had similar failings. Also in 2004, Adam Rickwood, 14, hanged himself in his cell, soon after being restrained by ill-trained Serco staff in the now closed Hassockfield STC in County Durham. In 2015 an undercover BBC reporter filmed staff at G4S-run Medway centre abusing children, using excessive force and covering up bad practice.

In August last year, an HMIP inspection of Feltham Young Offender Institution led to an urgent notification to improve being sent to the Secretary of State for Justice, citing a breakdown of discipline, poor leadership and record levels of assault, self-harm and physical restraint. On the day the report came out, I met David Ramsbotham, chief inspector between 1995 and 2001. He told me not to read it until I looked at the one he had written in 1997. Apart from a change in the font and a few minor details, the reports were interchangeable, with a long list of failures to provide safe care and a decent education for this troubled group of boys.

The emphasis on control, punishment and containment of children in custody continues to dominate any attempt to rehabilitate or educate. Almost all these children will eventually be released, with most serving sentences of fewer than two years. Without the right help they will return to offending, thereby creating more victims and harming themselves, their communities and their families. This will lead to yet more taxpayers’ money being used to fund health, social care, the police, courts and prisons.

There are a diminishing number of children in custody, currently 600 compared with up to 3,000 in the Blair years, but the re-offending rate for this group is the highest seen anywhere in the justice system. More than 60 per cent commit an offence within a year of being released.

In my 2015 review of the Youth Justice System, I recommended the creation of a new form of custody — Secure Schools — to replace the existing estate. These would be run by established schools, trusts and other education providers, rather than by either the state or the contract-bound private sector. I proposed that Secure Schools should be just that, schools with walls, rather than prisons that attempt but fail to educate.

Two years ago Oasis, a charity that runs many academies in the most challenging inner-city locations, was selected to open the first Secure School on the site of Medway STC, but despite the support of the many ministers who have passed through the Ministry of Justice, progress has been painfully slow. This new academy is scheduled to open in 2022, seven years after it was first proposed. Contrast this with the Department for Education, which will have opened hundreds of free schools in the same period. The MoJ must be prepared to reduce its tortuous bureaucracy and resist the controlling instincts of the prison service. It must give Oasis the freedom to get on with the plan to deliver good discipline, bespoke education and therapeutic care.

Children who end up in custody often have learning difficulties or mental health problems. They are often from broken families or have been brought up in care, and have suffered abuse and exploitation. Yes, some of them have committed serious and shocking crimes, but if we want them to go on to be successful adults and to take care of their own children, we must treat them differently. If we want these children to change, we have to start giving them what they need, not what we may feel they deserve.

Cold war

Russia's bid to control the Arctic

FRANCIS PIKE



[iStock]

It may be time for Father Christmas to look for a new home, before the Russians kick him out. ‘This is our Arctic,’ declared the Russian explorer Artur Chilingarov when he went to the North Pole in 2003. Four years later, another Russian expedition, again led by Chilingarov, planted a titanium flag on the seabed 2.5 miles below the Pole. It was a symbolic gesture of a geopolitical ambition. The jingoistic Chilingarov proclaimed: ‘Our task is to remind the world that Russia is a great Arctic and scientific power.’

Since 2013, Russia has invested heavily in seven military/naval bases along its Arctic coast to strengthen the country’s power and influence. ‘The Americans think that only [they] can... make the rules,’ Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated. ‘In terms of the NSR [Northern Sea Route], this is our national transport artery.’ Last month, barely reported by western media, President Vladimir Putin, at a ceremony in St Petersburg’s Admiralty shipyard, unveiled a new diesel-electric icebreaker ship, the *Viktor Chernomyrdin*, the most powerful non-nuclear vessel of its type in the world. Just a month earlier, another new icebreaker, the *Arktika*, a 33,000-ton nuclear-powered ship with the displacement of a second world war aircraft carrier, began operations in the Arctic. Its bows can crash through ice 10ft thick.

Future plans include three ‘Leader Class’ 70,000-ton behemoths to add to the roster of 37 large icebreakers. It is a force that supports the Northern Fleet, based near the city of Murmansk off the Barents Sea, which musters an impressive 35 surface vessels and the same number of submarines.

The Russian Arctic with its 15,000 miles of coastline, home to two million people, was of dubious value until recently. Global warming has changed that. According to the 2014 report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Arctic ice volumes have decreased by 75 per cent since 1980 and large swaths of the Arctic Ocean could be ice-free within a generation. For North Asian countries, a sea route along Russia’s Arctic would cut shipping times to Europe by weeks. Even more importantly, the Arctic Ocean, 3 per cent of the world’s surface — about the same as mainland Russia — is estimated to contain 22 per cent of the Earth’s oil and natural gas as well as copious quantities of minerals. While the international community signals its global warming credentials, many countries will put Arctic exploitation above ecological interests.

Allocation of these exploitation rights is a hot topic. While the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) allows the littoral Arctic Council countries — Canada, Denmark via Greenland, Norway, Russia and the United States — to extend their territorial waters 200 miles from shoreline, beyond that point there is ample scope for disagreement, and not just about boundaries. If a country can prove a ‘continental margin’ — a shallow shelf linked to the mainland — then an exclusive Economic Extension Zone (EEZ) can be established up to 350 miles from the shore. Russia, Canada and Denmark all lay claim to the Lomonosov Ridge, a 1,100-mile-long underwater mountain range that splits the Arctic in two.

A further area of contention is ‘passage rights’. UNCLOS provides all nations with the right to use territorial waters for passage but this does not apply to internal waters. Russia currently treats its Northern Sea Route as internal and charges passage fees accordingly. It could, by its own interpretation of UNCLOS, block access at any time.

So far the American response to Russia’s proprietorial claims has been dilatory. It was only in 2018, after a 30-year hiatus, that the US ventured to send a surface fleet to the Arctic led by the carrier USS *Harry S. Truman*. However, American resources in the area are threadbare. Although Congress approved the building of a new \$655 million icebreaker last year, its current coastguard capacity in the Arctic is a single heavy icebreaker, the 43-year-old *Polar Star*.

Nevertheless, secretary of state Mike Pompeo is well aware of the economic potential of the Arctic, as he made clear on a visit to Finland in May 2019. However, with the election of Joe Biden as President, the Trump-Pompeo attempt to revitalise US economic interest and military strength in the Arctic is likely to be short-lived. Congress, despite the entreaties of Presidents Bush and Obama, refused to ratify UNCLOS and has so far excluded the US from the possibility of extending its EEZ — at least by international law. But the economic benefits to the US could in any case be moot.

In December 2016, the departing President Obama and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau concocted an accord to prevent Alaskan drilling indefinitely. The aim was to thwart the pro-oil presidency of Donald Trump. In March 2019, Trump’s attempt to lift the Obama ban was judged unlawful by a federal court. As with Obama, Biden’s strategy in the area can be expected to draw heavily on the weasel words ‘sustainable’ and ‘responsible’ — in short, no geopolitical strategy at all. It seems probable that Biden will give up the contest for the Arctic as easily as Obama gave up control of the South China Sea.

As for Europe, it has skin in the game through Denmark’s sovereign rights over Greenland. Although Denmark has increased its naval budget, it is a drop in the Arctic Ocean compared to Russia’s. Given that, at 1.3 per cent of GDP, Danish military spending falls way short of its Nato commitments, Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen’s tart response to Trump’s suggested purchase of Greenland was foolhardy. Trump promptly cancelled his scheduled Danish visit. No bets as to which global power Frederiksen will depend on if Russia threatens its Arctic rights. For sure it will not be the EU.

The EU, unlike India and China, cannot even get an observer seat on the Arctic Council, seemingly because Canada has vetoed its application owing to Europe’s embargo on seal skins.

Fortunately, you might think, China is not an Arctic nation. Or is it? In 2018 China made the very postmodern claim to be a ‘near Arctic’ nation in spite of being nowhere near the Arctic — 900 miles, to be precise. As an early signatory to the Treaty of Svalbard (1925), China claims the same rights as Norway to exploit the resources of the Norwegian-controlled Svalbard archipelago. China further argues that UNCLOS, which it has ratified, gives it rights over the ‘Arctic Belt and Road’. Chinese investments in Greenland now account for 12 per cent of its GDP, while Finland and Iceland are being similarly embraced. China denies expansionary intent, but in 2010 the Chinese Rear Admiral Yin Zhuo alarmingly claimed that: ‘The Arctic belongs to all the people around the world, so no nation has sovereignty over it... China must play an indispensable role in Arctic exploration as we have one-fifth of the world’s population.’

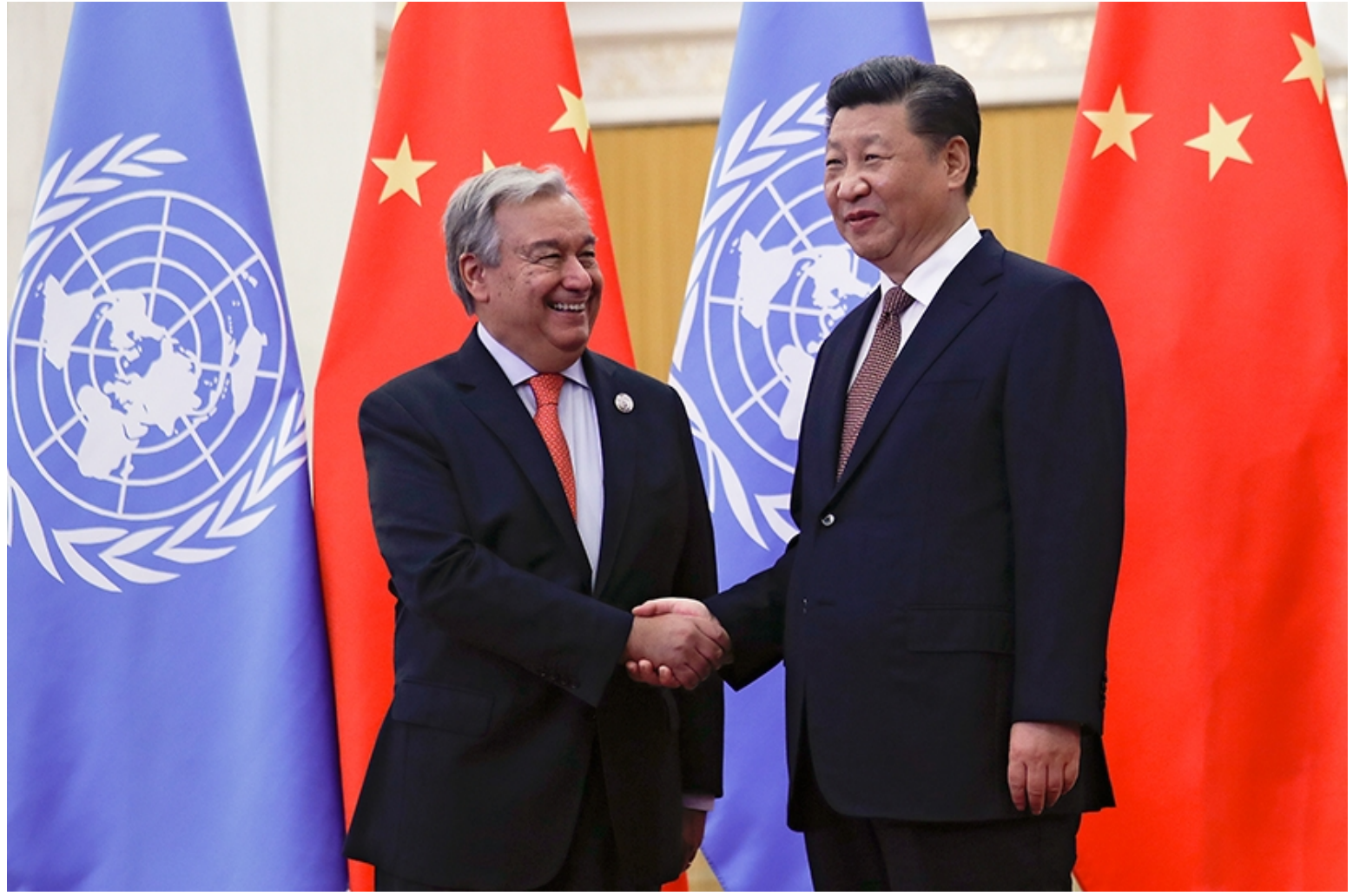
Is Russia worried? Probably. But its bid to control the Arctic depends heavily on Chinese finance. Needs must. The likely future was signposted when the Silk Road Fund and China National Petroleum took a 30 per cent stake in Yamal LNG, one of the world’s largest liquid natural gas projects. Europe may think of the Arctic as a polar bear sanctuary, but bigger players do not agree.

Meanwhile, in the UK the government seems more intent on discussing Scotch eggs and preventing the playing of Christmas board games than stopping a Russian takeover of the Arctic. The BBC’s lack of interest in geopolitics is equally scary. In spite of its 2,000 journalists and 41 international bureaus, it made no mention of the commissioning of Russia’s new icebreakers. Two months ago, by contrast, the BBC website displayed a photograph of a cute, 18-year-old Greta Thunberg acolyte posing with a climate-change placard on an iceberg. For the Beeb, it seems, the Arctic is only an ecological story — though I suppose Father Christmas and the North Pole might get a look-in over the festive season.

Buying power

How China co-opts the UN

CLAUDIA ROSETT



United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres shakes hands with Chinese President Xi Jinping [Andy Wong-Pool/Getty Images]

It was one of those forgettably historic moments at the United Nations. The year was 2015, the UN’s 70th anniversary, and China’s President Xi Jinping was in New York, speaking in person to the UN General Assembly. In festive spirit, Xi announced that China would set up a \$1 billion trust fund to be dispersed over ten years to ‘support the UN’s work’ and ‘contribute more to world peace and development’.

So began the Peace and Development Trust Fund, one of China’s more insidious projects to co-opt the UN, its logo and its global networks. On Xi’s watch, China has become the second-largest contributor to the UN General Assembly and Peace-keeping budgets, secured the fawning allegiance of the World Health Organisation and taken charge of four other specialised UN agencies.

But that trust fund, one of Xi’s pet projects, has taken on a quietly invasive role that needs a major public airing. China’s Peace and Development fund bypasses the common pots of UN funding and channels millions of dollars every year directly from Beijing to the executive office of the UN Secretary-General.

Not that the \$1 billion promised by Xi ever fully materialised. By the time the deal was signed in 2016, China had arranged a big discount for itself, downsizing the gift to \$200 million over ten years, or \$20 million a year. It was still gravy, and the then Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon was grateful. His spokesman described China’s new fund as a ‘demonstration of the strong commitment of the government and people of China to the goals and activities of the UN’.

Actually, it’s worked the other way around: China’s Peace and Development fund has translated into a stronger UN commitment to the goals and activities of China. A priority of this fund is UN promotion of Xi’s Belt and Road Initiative, with its predatory lending practices, strong-arm diplomacy and trade practices, and potential military extension of China’s reach.

China’s direct cash infusion to the secretariat, totalling \$20 million a year, is split into two subfunds. One funnels \$10 million annually to the executive office of the Secretary-General, to help him promote ‘Peace and Security’. The other subfund pours \$10 million a year, earmarked for ‘Sustainable Development’, to a satrapy within the secretariat, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), which since 2007, at the pleasure of the Secretary-General, has been run by — you guessed it — China.

This Peace and Development lucre is doled out for dozens of projects each year, blessed by Beijing, approved by Secretary-General António Guterres and adorned with the UN’s baby-blue label. In approving these projects, Guterres is advised by a five-member steering committee, chaired by his Brazilian chef de cabinet. The other four committee members are all from China: one senior official from China’s foreign ministry, another from China’s finance ministry, plus China’s ambassador to the UN and the UN Under-Secretary-General in charge of DESA, previously China’s ambassador to the UN in Geneva, Liu Zhenmin. Within DESA, the sustainable development subfund is managed by another official from — you guessed it again — China.

Much of this operation is intriguingly opaque. That creates a daunting task for anyone trying to rule out notions about China’s Communist regime lavishing slush funds on the UN secretariat. There have long been many trust funds for many purposes at the UN, some single-donor, some multi-donor. They can be approved either by the General Assembly or the Secretary-General. But this is a rather special case in which former Secretary-General Ban approved, and Guterres continues to legitimise, a flow of many millions every year from the world’s leading tyranny to his own office.

The UN has kept secret the full text of this trust-fund agreement with China’s government. Most of the project descriptions that the UN releases to the public are brief and generic, consisting of a few sentences and a lone figure for the total dollar amount. It has been almost a year since the UN last released updates on new project approvals. According to the Secretary-General’s press office, for projects given a green light in 2020, there will be no information available until 2021.

From what can be gleaned, it appears the Secretary-General’s Peace and Security subfund goes mainly to security-related projects in Africa, where China has become both a major investor and a big contributor of troops to UN peacekeeping missions. Sounds reasonable, except for the nagging question of why, with a UN peacekeeping budget of some \$6.5 billion a year funded through the usual multilateral channels, China feels a need to give \$10 million a year to the Secretary-General for more of the same. For instance, \$1.1 million for ‘strengthening peacekeeping capacity with a focus on Africa’. Who and what exactly is the Secretary-General, with his Chinese pin money, strengthening at the margin?

As for the development subfund, dispensing \$10 million a year to the Chinese-run DESA, all roads lead to the Belt and Road. It’s written right into the subfund’s guidelines (‘Strengthen national capacity of developing countries along the Belt and Road region...’). Under the UN label, millions have been spent on ‘Jointly Building the Belt and Road’ and ‘Promoting Sustainable Investments Along the Belt and Road’. Then there’s the \$3 million project for training ‘up to 500 senior civil servants (Permanent Secretary or Director-General level)’ to better mesh with the strategic planning of the China-UN development agenda.

A UN internal audit of the Peace and Development Trust Fund, dated 18 December 2019, found that: ‘Controls relating to governance and project management need to be strengthened to increase the impact of the Trust Fund’s activities.’ But for all the dissatisfaction of the UN auditors, Xi seems happy. In September the UN held a virtual celebration of its 75th anniversary. Speaking from Beijing, Xi announced to the General Assembly that ‘China will extend the Peace and Development Trust Fund between the UN and China for five years after it expires in 2025’. Whatever’s going on in there, he figures he’s getting his money’s worth.

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Belle époque

Meet Belle Delphine, the pink-haired online sensation

TANYA GOLD



Belle Delphine lives in a mock Tudor house in a gated community in Hove. It’s necrotic, and soothing. You could be anywhere, and this is apt. Belle lives on the internet, where she entertains her subscribers, who pay \$35 a month through the website OnlyFans. She is 21, and she grew up on the internet. ‘It raised me,’ she says.

I watch one of her films before we meet. It shows her dressed as a Disney princess in a long pink wig and small clothes. She attacks herself with paint and rides a fluffy unicorn while shouting. Is the unicorn the internet? Is she the unicorn? I hate the film — the childishness makes me uncomfortable — but it isn’t for me. I make my husband watch it and demand he describes his emotional response. He makes a strangled noise. I make a male friend watch it too. He buries his head in his iPhone and vapes furiously.

Belle isn’t a garden-variety performer. She’s almost a performative artist and the joke is almost on the punters, who pay for a ‘girlfriend experience’, which means she delivers updates on the life she doesn’t have because she is faking one for them. But she plays with them. She promises a video of herself ‘stroking a big cock’. It is a chicken; a hen actually, because she can’t find a cock. She sold jars of her used bathwater for \$30 (she looks very clean, though I doubt people who worry about hygiene order bath-water from women in Hove on the internet). They sold out in three days. Belle is an internet archetype because she is so open to it. Other vloggers (video bloggers) posted videos of themselves vaping the bathwater. A *Spectator* colleague drank some, but he’s young.

This interview is arranged by her partner, whom she asks me not to name. I knock on the wrong door, and a bewildered middle-aged man points me up the hill — though I wonder if he is really Belle Delphine, hoax upon hoax. The partner opens the door. He is young. He looks tired. The house is covered in tableaux: pink balloons arranged round a chair; Harry Potter artefacts. It’s a child’s bedroom spread across a comfortable suburban house. She looks nothing like the girl in the video and I’m glad, because I can’t interview someone half-nude on a unicorn faking a tantrum. Her hair is long and brown, and she is dressed in casual clothes. She is luminously pretty. She has a soft, squeaky voice. Her real name is Mary.

She grew up in Cape Town. Her parents divorced, and she was taken to Lymington in Hampshire by her mother. She doesn’t see her father, but I guessed that from a lyric in her film: ‘lil tits/big ass/no Dad.’ At school she wanted to be liked so much, ‘I would injure myself just to make them laugh. I had a swing in the garden, and I would fall off it to make them happy.’

Is she still doing that? She left at 14 after being bullied online. She was treated for depression and eventually made friends online. She met these new friends wearing extraordinary clothes. She dressed as Lolita: she likes pink because unhappy children find it hard to grow up. But she stopped, ‘because I had so much attention in public’. I imagine she did. But she continued to post her photographs, because she finds life easier as Belle than she does as Mary: ‘No one is going to speak to me if I am sat there not wearing anything to comment on, but if I’m wearing something crazy people will say “That’s crazy” and start a conversation. I can’t start a conversation with anyone.’ She soon reached 30,000 followers on Instagram.

Her break-out was simple: she made an orgasm face. ‘In *hentai* [animated Japanese pornography] if a girl is having intercourse and if she has an orgasm, they draw the orgasm in a very specific way. I made a video of me replicating this face.’ She does it for me. She rolls her eyes and sticks out her tongue.

She earned one million followers in a month and 4.5 million within a year. Six months after turning 18 she decided ‘the only real way to make money is to be sexual online’.

I’m not sure how she feels about it because she contradicts herself. She says she loves ‘boys’, but also says: ‘I hate that I am inspiring other people [women] to do it.’

She says it is ‘fun’ but then says: ‘I understand it’s everyone’s worst nightmare to hear that your daughter’s doing porn.’

‘But,’ she says, ‘I always get great satisfaction after posting it. Because it feels like I have accomplished something.’ Her subscribers expect 30 to 40 updates a day. She usually begins with cosplay. She asks me, kindly: do you know what that is? I reply: is it like when I asked my husband to dress up as an owl? ‘Not really.’

She is addicted to the attention, the affirmation and the fear. To explain this, she describes the day she wore new boots when she was younger: ‘Everyone was looking at me. Everyone was laughing at me. I was hyper conscious. I got that same feeling posting the [first] photo where I showed a bit of thigh. You look back and think — that’s nothing to me now.’ She sounds amazed.

After months of teasing, her first hard-core film will appear on Christmas Day. Her partner is in it, but without his face because she is prettier than him. ‘I am having that same scared feeling,’ she says. ‘After I take this leap, I suppose there will be no scared feeling anymore. Because that is the furthest you can go.’

I wonder if this desire to expose herself is a yearning for acceptance: when you have shown everything, you have nothing left to give. Those who love you will love you and those who hate you will hate you. In judgment there is peace.

She says that when she was thrown off Instagram — where she had 5.3 million followers — for sexual content, ‘I felt so irrelevant. All that weird fake power I’d built up in my head that I thought I had... I was left with nothing. I felt irrelevant and small and defeated’. She stayed away from the internet for a year. What did you do? ‘Nothing. I had no reason to do anything anymore.’

She sounds animated now — far more so than when we are talking about sex, but that might because she is more interested in marketing than sex. ‘I’m good for a YouTube thumbnail because I’m pink-haired and bright-eyed,’ she says happily. ‘I thought my life was going to be,’ she pauses, looking for the word, ‘shit. I didn’t go to school, I was uneducated.’ She looked at photographs of the rich and imagined them ‘untouchable’. Now she can have that. Belle can give it to her.

She is searching for security, but the internet is a dangerous place to look. It’s morally neutral, like the sea. I ask when she will stop. She doesn’t know. She talks vaguely about a future life with a future family in which she will be a bourgeois mother at the school gates with a secret. I have to remind myself how young she is. I find her charming and touching, and I think of her as Rapunzel trapped in the tower wondering when to let herself out. It won’t be soon. She makes \$1.2 million a month.

Letter from Albania

JAMES BARTHOLOMEW



Our heavily laden taxi turned off the main highway from Tirana and started to negotiate the rough, one-track road. The road wound its way around the edges of the mountains until we reached the ruins of Spaç prison, once a slave labour camp in the communist era of Albania. Two three-storey buildings housed the large cells where 54 men at a time had lived and slept. They were required to work gruelling shifts, filling metal wagons with copper ore and pushing the along uneven rails, some of which were under water. If they failed to fulfil their quota, they would have to do a second shift. And if they failed again, they would be put in a punishment cell. That meant sleeping half-starved in a tiny cell on a concrete floor. The temperature could fall to minus 18°C. As the sun shone on the beautiful mountains, it was hard to imagine the torture and death that had once taken place here. It seemed more like a place for a picnic.

Albania could be called the forgotten country of Europe. The former dictator Enver Hoxha, who ruled for 44 years, broke with the Soviet Union after Stalin died because he thought it was going soft and deviating from the true Marxist/Leninist path. Later he also broke with China after Mao's death for the same reason. So the country was isolated for decades. It was no threat to anyone so it played no part in international politics. Though Albania eventually gave up communism in the 1990s, the communist legacy was a rotten one. Many politicians and administrators under communism continued to have powerful jobs and even now, the Speaker of the House is a former communist minister of the interior. The grey market in bribes and blackmail has continued. The end result is that Albania is much richer than it was under communism but not as prosperous as it could be.

Crucially, the country fails the McDonald's test. If even McDonald's sees no point in opening up in a place, you can be sure it's in a sorry state. Very few international companies are willing to do business in Albania. Poor governance and an almost paralysed judicial system keep them away. Tourists might find it charming that there is no Zara, no Primark, no Costa Coffee and so on, but there are also few international companies in manufacturing, technology, mining or finance, so Albania languishes on only 35 per cent of average European GDP per capita.

Yet Albania certainly has its attractions. Tirana is not pretty but the coffee culture thrives and meals are almost embarrassingly cheap. It only became the capital in 1920, so most of it was built during the communist era. The design of the buildings is therefore dull, but in the early 2000s Edi Rama, then the mayor of Tirana, now the Prime Minister, had the idea that they would look more cheerful painted in different colours. So, lo and behold: Tirana is a pastel-coloured city. Many new blocks of offices and flats are under construction. This must surely be a sign of growing prosperity, I suggested to locals — but they were not so sure. They spoke darkly of flats being bought by members of the drug-dealing and people-trafficking gangs and then left empty.

I travelled south to the resort town of Vlora, which has a beach front that must be at least a mile long — Albania's own Promenade des Anglais, with restaurants ready to serve the modest number of people strolling by — then inland towards Tepelena. On our journey we passed the wide river of Vjosa, which is one of the last wild rivers of Europe and sometimes spreads as much as 2km across. Byron came this way and called it a country 'of the most picturesque beauty'. He also loved Albanian clothing and wore a grand Albanian costume for his portrait which is now in the National Portrait Gallery.

In Tepelena, we went to see another gulag camp. This was a place to which all the residents of a village in the north had been sent, including elderly men, women and children. One communist had been murdered in that village so the whole populace was sent to the camp as punishment. The communists starved them, left them in the freezing cold and made them work. It is thought that 200 to 300 children died here. There are precious few gulag camps one can easily visit and this is one of them. It should be a World Heritage Site.

The story of communism needs heroes as well as evil dictators. An outstanding candidate in Albania is Musine Kokalari. She opposed the Communist party and was tried in one of those

Making a meal of it

The absurdity of Covid pub rules

MARCUS BERKMANN



A friend of mine went for a walk in the Cotswolds last weekend with his wife. At around four o'clock, tired but happy, they fetched up at a country pub. 'You'll have to eat a substantial meal,' said the landlady, crossly. 'But it's four o'clock,' said my friend. 'We're not hungry.' The landlady tutted and showed him a long and expensive menu. My friend and his wife turned around and walked out of the pub.

This, I think we can safely say, represents one end of the Tier 2 pub spectrum. At the other is a pub I know which used to be up the road from the local police station. This pub had, and continues to have, a famously good relationship with the rozzers: late-night lock-ins have long been a speciality. This pub is open but does not appear to be serving any food at all. If you peer in through the window, the front room is deserted, intentionally, while the back room is heaving with boozehounds, some of them former officers.

As a dedicated pub-goer of long standing, I have spent much of the past week sitting in and, very reluctantly, outside pubs taking the temperature of this ancient but ailing British tradition. The problem is that this government, whose back-of-fag-packet regulations have made our lives such a misery this year, has specified that we can go into pubs in Tier 2 only if we order a 'substantial' meal as well as the sundry pints of wallop we were intending to consume.

This seems to me a distinctly middle-class and middle-aged view of why people go to pubs. The young, who seek only oblivion; the solitary, who want only to sit in the corner with their pint; the poor, who cannot afford a £13.50 burger, however many amazing toppings it comes with; and the postmen, who habitually infest my local Wetherspoons every afternoon and engage in jocular post-related banter: all are excluded under the new rules.

But pubs want to survive. They need to survive. One landlady told me at the weekend her solution to the problem, which is, I think, the simplest and most imaginative yet. Everyone who comes into the pub has to order a cheese roll, or maybe a ham roll, for £2.50. They don't have to eat it, although almost everyone does, and when they have finished it, the plate won't be cleared away, but left there, possibly for hours, so that if anyone does come in to do a spot check, it looks as though they have just finished the roll. Otherwise they will be allowed to sit there and drink for as long as they want. It's fascinating, said the landlady. If you put a roll on a plate, it doesn't look like anything very much. But sprinkle a little mixed salad next to it and *voilà!* — a substantial meal.

What is a 'substantial meal'? Another friend of mine, of legal tendencies, looked at the regulations and saw that the word 'substantial' is nowhere to be seen. They talk about you having to order a 'table meal', which I suppose is anything beyond a bag of crisps. Might two bags of crisps qualify? 'Substantial' was the word used by Michael Gove, who probably hasn't been in a pub for decades.

Gove, who may have been talking first and thinking later, also wondered out loud whether a Scotch egg might be a substantial meal. On Friday I had a toe-numbing lunch with a fellow freelance writer — a business lunch, under the rules, and therefore acceptable — outside a pub in the City, where we spotted at least a dozen people eating Scotch eggs. The Scotch egg industry must think it's already Christmas. By January there could be a national shortage of Scotch eggs.

The business lunch is a magnificent loophole. When I rang another local pub to book a lunch for later in the week, the woman said we could sit indoors only if we were from the same household or accompanying support bubble. Business lunch, I said, and she laughed.

Maybe that's what TV presenter Kay Burley claimed recently when she hosted an intimate birthday party for ten at a 'Covid-compliant restaurant'. She got into trouble only because her gang went to another establishment later and then back to hers for an after-party.

Catching moths

By Mark Solomons



Colourful character: an elephant hawk-moth. Credit: iStock

As darkness falls, a group of mainly middle-aged men set up traps of various shapes and sizes — some sophisticated and expensive-looking, others more Heath Robinson-like — in gardens and fields across the country. These are moth enthusiasts: a largely unknown and, by their very nature, unseen group of hobbyists. They are mostly fanatical birdwatchers too, and from backgrounds that include journalism, the civil service, the Royal Mail and the NHS.

They lay their traps, some of which cost £500 or more, throughout most of the year. In the mornings they count, identify and list their catch in minute detail. The moths are then carefully released, away from prowling blackbirds who turn up when they think there's a chance of an easy meal.

Most traps use actinic bulbs, which emit bright UV light to attract the moths. The moths then flutter into a plastic or wooden container beneath and crawl, dazed but unharmed, into empty egg boxes until the morning.

My local group is the Eel's Footmen, a play on words combining the name of the local pub — The Eel's Foot — with the footman family of moths that includes dusky, scarce, dingy and four-dotted. And if you think those are names to conjure with, just wait till you get to the wainscots, old lady, dark arches and, my favourite, the setaceous Hebrew character — if ever I write an autobiography, that's my title right there.

There is an overwhelming desire among moth lovers to compile as long a list as possible, including names in both English and Latin, as well as dates, times, locations, habitat and weather conditions. When the moth-catchers came to my garden and enquired about habitat, I said it was a former country cottage with some modernisation. They didn't laugh. Mothing is a serious business. What I apparently should have said, though, was 'acid grassland with nearby reedbeds'.

As with twitchers, some moth-catchers travel vast distances to clap eyes on a rare specimen or anything officially 'notifiable' — meaning that it goes into the county record as a rare example or first for the area.

Lists are vital in keeping a record of whether numbers are going up or down. This is important in an area such as ours on the Suffolk coast where habitats are threatened by the proposed new Sizewell C nuclear power station. It is also eye-opening for those of us who previously thought of

Learning the lessons of Grenfell for good

Claims that combustible insulation materials did not affect the outcome at Grenfell Tower are flawed and dangerous

DARRYL MATTHEWS

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[Photo: Intersect Architects Ltd. and Giltown Ltd]

In recent weeks, statements have been made by manufacturers of building materials used on the Grenfell Tower to help uncover the role that the cladding and insulation played in the tragic June 2017 fire. How materials perform in a fire is a technical area, but it is vital to shine a light on why the fire spread so quickly up and around the outside of Grenfell Tower. Lessons learned will inform how we construct and renovate buildings in future to make sure this never happens again.

One claim that has been made in connection with the inquiry is that the ‘outcome of the fire would not have been different in any material way’ if a non-combustible insulation had been used on the tower instead of a combustible insulation. This assertion ignores the facts, and masks fundamental truths of how combustible and non-combustible insulation behave.

Combustible insulation, such as that used on Grenfell Tower, can play a major role during a building fire. In the first instance, plastic foam insulation is combustible and constitutes a ‘fuel load’. A University of Milan study found that the combination of combustible plastic insulation and cladding of the types found on Grenfell, on a building with similar dimensions, would supply a fuel load equivalent to approximately 30,000 litres of petrol – with two-thirds of this fuel load coming from the insulation, one-third from the cladding.

What’s more, plastic foam insulation emits toxic gases and smoke when it burns. Professor David Purser, an expert witness to the Grenfell inquiry, described the insulation as the ‘main source of smoke particulates, carbon monoxide and hydrogen cyanide’ during the ‘early exterior fire’ on Grenfell Tower. Toxic gases and smoke are extremely dangerous, accounting for more than half of building fire casualties in the UK – and, according to Professor Purser, are ‘likely to have contributed to the incapacitation and deaths of flat occupants’.

How might the outcome have been different with non-combustible insulation? International experience shows that when fires have broken out in high-rise buildings with the combination of non-combustible insulation and combustible cladding, the outcomes are far less devastating. Fires at the Melbourne Lacrosse Tower and the Polat Tower in Istanbul show that non-combustible insulation plays a role in protecting a building during a façade fire. While these towers were damaged externally, no lives were lost, and the buildings could be restored.

Had Grenfell Tower been fitted with non-combustible insulation, the fire would have been fuelled to a far lesser extent, reducing the risk of secondary fires owing to the diminished fuel load. The fire would also have emitted much less toxic smoke. Far from making no difference, the use of non-combustible insulation could therefore reasonably be expected to have given residents a greater chance of escape.

All of this is set in the context of a broken system. The Grenfell inquiry has heard shocking evidence that manufacturers of combustible insulation falsified test samples by doctoring combustible insulation with additional fire-retardant chemicals or otherwise gaming the fire testing process. For example, the inquiry heard witness testimony that test processes were manipulated to allow combustible products to pass large-scale fire tests in order to present their products as compliant with building regulations for many years prior to Grenfell. This includes insulation products found on Grenfell, with witnesses from the companies concerned admitting that tests were deliberately engineered to gain approval to sell combustible products on high-rise buildings, despite knowing they were not considered safe for use, and that the insulation products tested were not the same as those sold to customers.

The UK government has taken bold steps to ban the use of combustible materials on residential buildings over 18 metres in height. It was right to do so, and it should protect the safety of the public by extending the ban to all high-rise and high-risk buildings. Now it is crucial that the government puts public safety first and does not bow to pressure to revert to any version of the old system that allowed combustible materials on these buildings. Why take the risk to do otherwise?

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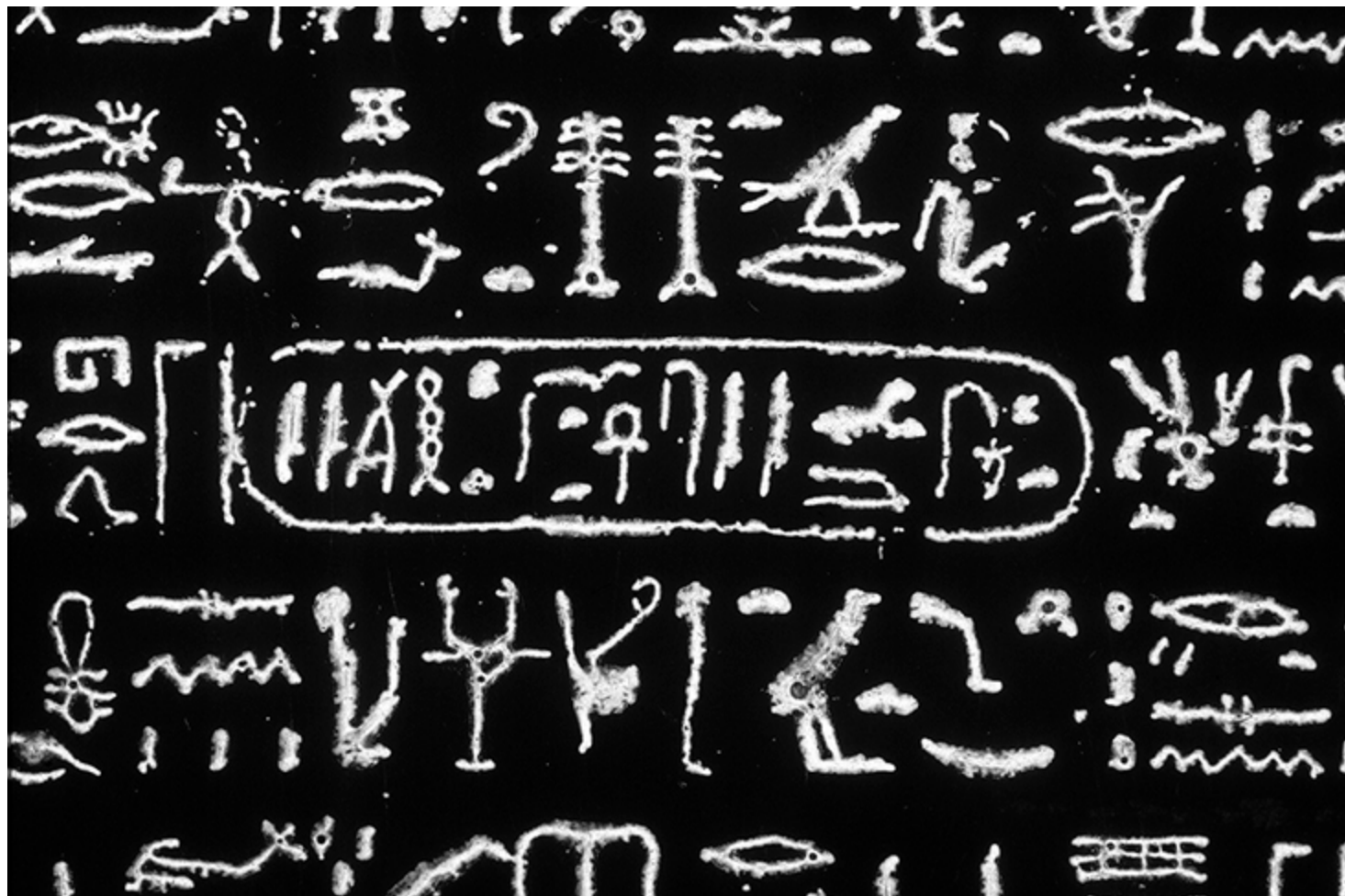


The real jewel of the Nile

The decipherment of the Rosetta Stone led to bitter feuding – but there was mutual curiosity and collaboration too, says Elizabeth Froom

The Riddle of the Rosetta: How an English Polymath and a French Polyglot Discovered the Meaning of Egyptian Hieroglyphs

by Jed Z. Buchwald And Diane Greco Josefowicz
Princeton, pp.575, £34



Detail from the hieroglyphic portion of the Rosetta Stone. Credit: Alamy

The Rosetta Stone is the icon of decipherment. As one of the most popular objects in the British Museum, its irregular shape and the once white-on-black of its three scripts — hieroglyphic, demotic, Greek — are distinctive enough to sell countless socks, keyrings and nail files in the museum shop. The stone’s marketable popularity testifies both to the allure of hieroglyphs, including a persistent orientalising idea of their ‘mystery’, and the seemingly miraculous achievement of code-breaking. The latter is most associated with the two men of *The Riddle of the Rosetta*’s subtitle: the ‘English polymath’ Thomas Young (1773-1829) and the ‘French polyglot’ Jean-François Champollion (1790-1832). Theirs is a story much told and much mythologised. Champollion especially has become a romantic, tragic hero whose epiphany was ‘so powerful he fainted dead away’.

One of my students, when he saw *The Riddle* on my desk, huffed ‘not another book on decipherment?’ I confess I initially felt the same. However, this book is different. Not only is it arguably the most meticulous and thoroughgoing account of the work of Young and Champollion, it incorporates unpublished manuscripts, including many early drafts. The result is ‘a study in contrasts’, examining in detail ‘the separate developmental arcs of their ideas’. Through their painstaking examination of these documents, which required mastery of complex archives in multiple ancient and modern scripts and languages, the authors do much to unpack the mythologies as well.

The decipherment is often told as a tale of theft and competition, with strong nationalist overtones. The stone’s rediscovery was a by-product of conflict; it was found by a French officer in 1799 at the Nile port of el-Rashid (ancient Rosetta) as the local fort was being reinforced against incoming British forces. It was later confiscated as ‘a proud trophy of the arms of Britain’, hence its current place in the British Museum. Champollion’s decipherment has been cast as a particular triumph in this context. But, as told here, conflict between Young and Champollion did not arise from power struggles between Britain and France: ‘Their concerns were narrower and more local’, with differences in character at the heart.

The book does not begin, as might be expected, with the discovery of the stone, but rather some four years later, at a dinner party in London at which Young, already known for his work on the wave theory of light, was a guest. So much in this first chapter sets the tone of the book. As we learn about the different men at the table, key intellectual preoccupations of the time emerge — from the relationships between written and oral traditions in the study of ancient texts, the relevance of antiquity to the modern world, to Scottish nationalism — all of which continue to resonate today.

The book consistently brings the influence of pervasive academic, political and personal contexts to bear on the stories, for example through Champollion’s activism or the emphasis on Young’s Quaker upbringing, which he just could not shake despite himself. Young ‘did not expect to discover much worthwhile in the written remnants of Egyptian antiquity’, in his own words ‘among the monuments of so foolish and so frivolous a nation’.

A more sympathetic portrait of Champollion is painted, derived from his desire to ‘open a window onto an attractive world, peopled by individuals whose lives he admired and whose beliefs he respected’. Yet, despite this, the book is an account of European intellectual history. The ancient Egyptian language is the puzzle and there are only fleeting glimpses of its place and people.

The expatriate Egyptian community Champollion was so involved with in Paris is briefly acknowledged, especially his Coptic teachers Yuhanna Chiftichi and Rufa’il Zakhûr (known in France as Raphaël de Monachis or Dom Raphaël). Champollion saw Coptic, the final phase of the Egyptian language and liturgical language of the Coptic church, as his ‘time-travel mechanism’. But little is said about this community or these men, in contrast to, for example, Champollion’s teacher, then rival, Silvestre de Sacy. It may be simply that less is known about these relationships, but it left me wanting more.

The dazzling scholarly nimbleness of Champollion and Young is richly illustrated throughout the book — that is no myth, but it emerges as something a little more human. While preparing his Coptic dictionaries, Champollion kept pages on the left blank for expansions and redactions as he worked up his entries on the right: ‘In other words, he planned to be surprised.’ Unfinished drafts, partially expressed ideas, corrections and deletions, all these are familiar to any academic, any creative, and they ‘complicate the tidy story of Champollion’s achievement as it has been told for the past century’.

Something similar is captured for Young, for example in documents in which he literally cut and pasted lines of demotic from copies of the Rosetta Stone to test correspondences with the Greek. Seeing work in progress does not detract from their prodigious genius; rather, it becomes somewhat more accessible to those of us who do not share it.

Memoirs without memory

Mike Cormack

What I Do (Memoirs)

by James Kelman

Thi Wurd, pp.192, £12



James Kelman. Credit: Roberto Ricciuti/Getty Images

James Kelman doubtless remains best known for his 1994 Booker prize win for *How Late It Was, How Late* and the subsequent furore. The brouhaha looks painfully absurd 25 years later with the plaudits Kelman has received (when not being dismissed as akin to an ‘illiterate savage’) perhaps the greatest in post-war English literature. Here is a writer to stand alongside Zola, Beckett and Joyce. Yet since then it feels as though Kelman’s audience has grown more selective — a process perhaps aided by his move to the USA in 1998 to teach creative writing at the University of Texas at Austin.

But with Kelman now in his 75th year, it’s long past time for the man himself to step forward. So we have *What I Do (Memoirs)*, published by the small press thi wurd. I will admit to hungrily anticipating Kelman giving a personal insight into the Booker imbroglio, and was keen to know what he would say about, for example, Irvine Welsh, A.L. Kennedy, Gordon Brown and the SNP government. Would he be waspish or taciturn? Would he allow a little lightness into his prose, perhaps even a self-deprecating irony? Or would he remain severe and unyielding?

The first thing to note — and this will colour the entire reception of the book — is that despite the title this is *not* a memoir in the sense of personal reminisces. A brief foreword notes: ‘The writings collected here were written firstly to be read or heard whether as obituary, memorial or eulogy.’ *What I Do* is hence a series of remembrances of friends, activists and writers (such as Tom Leonard, Jeff Torrington, June Jordan, Hugh Savage and Agnes Owen) in which Kelman himself appears rather fleetingly. If you feel slightly mugged I can’t blame you. I certainly did. There isn’t much by way of anecdote, and even fewer opinions that couldn’t be safely discussed in a university tutorial. Kelman might think himself above such matters but I’ll freely admit that I am not, and so from the very outset found the book disappointing. I wanted to be *entertained*, damn it.

As is often the case with elegies, there is a degree of disguised autobiography through promoting the values with which Kelman would like to be associated, while the occasional anecdote manages to peep through. For example, he notes Mary Gray Hughes’s lament about ‘the quantity of people, in writing and everything else, who... write and read for money or fame or this and that, and too rarely because of writing itself’. Similarly, he describes the author and artist Alasdair Gray as ‘one of a band of artists whose work is known, respected and even loved in other parts of the world, yet his advocacy failed to move the arts establishment’. It’s not hard to read between the lines there.

Meanwhile, the stories such as they are can be inscrutable. On three occasions he mentions encountering writers whom he admires — Mary Gray Hughes, John La Rose and Tillie Olsen — but can’t remember what was said. On Hughes: ‘There were things I wanted to say. Who knows what I did say, I cannot remember.’ On first meeting La Rose: ‘John answered the door. I cannot remember what I said although it wasn’t as brief as “hello”.’ And when on a discussion panel with Olsen:

I found nothing to say, nothing. The panel discussion was about to begin. I could not say anything to her. She gripped my wrist, then returned to her seat. I had to leave the room.

Such absences are perhaps a refusal to play the memoir game by trading gossip for approval. But readers like gossip, especially about writers. That’s why we read literary biographies and memoirs. Rejecting the game is wilful at best, self-sabotage at worst.

Kelman’s discussions of literary works are also disappointing. You can’t do a close reading during an elegy, of course, but revising for publication offers every opportunity for specificities. Yet he gives very few quotes to illustrate his points, which thus feel like windy generalisations rather than rigorous analyses. So when discussing Agnes Owen (with whom he would be published, along with Alasdair Gray, in the collection *Lean Tales*), he says (amongst other similar points):

In her stories children, men and women struggle to survive. Society is revealed. Its custodians employ battalions of highly-educated servants, assisted by skilled security operatives, to perpetuate the swingle through propaganda, mystification and disinformation. Institutional bullying and harassment aid the process.

Fine, but how about some examples? Where’s the beef?

Still, Kelman’s prose is very fine, strongly hewn and precise. He hasn’t mellowed; he still rages at injustice. Every chapter features absorbing discussions (particularly on the Nigerian writer Amos Tututola, where he describes the techniques both use regarding orature in order precisely to convey a colonised community and culture), and some stories even verge on the comic, as when he causes an all-white university class consternation when he refers to them as ‘European-Americans’. (Characteristically, he does not expand on this by setting the scene or sketching the characters.) But this is not the book you expect and not the book the reader would want. Judged on its own merits, it’s perfectly fine, if minor. To call it his memoirs is an irrecoverable egregiousness.

A great Liberal imperialist

Andrew Lycett

Statesman of Europe: A Life of Sir Edward Grey

by T.G. Otte

Allen Lane, pp.858, £35



Sir Edward Grey. Credit: Getty Images

This meaty but easily digested biography pivots around the events either side of that fateful evening of 4 August 1914 when Britain’s ultimatum to Germany over Belgium ran out and Sir Edward Grey memorably remarked that the lamps were going out over Europe.

As foreign secretary for almost a decade before that, Grey had deftly orchestrated a web of alliances designed to keep the peace in Europe, and Britain the dominant global power. But war and its attendant carnage unravelled his life’s work, leaving him a nervous wreck. He hung on in office until 1916 when the new prime minister David Lloyd George unceremoniously swept him out.

Lloyd George later led the attack on him as a ‘calamitous foreign secretary’, so aloof and obsessed with the ‘concert of Europe’ that he neglected Liberal values in an rapacious imperialist age, and committed grave errors, such as failing to deter Russia from mobilising to support Serbia.

You won’t find such criticism here. T.G. Otte is an admirer of Grey’s steady hand and application. As a diplomatic historian he revels in carefully drafted cables and personal contacts between Chancelleries. (The pre-war German and Russian envoys to Britain were first cousins, as of course were the hereditary rulers of all three countries.)

Similarly, there’s none of the determinism found in A.J.P. Taylor’s cheeky suggestion that railways accelerated the hostilities. Otte is a lucid champion of the human factor in the steady development of events. The main railway on offer is the North Eastern Railway (NER), of which Grey was chairman. Its earlier incarnation, the Newcastle and Berwick Railway, ran its line through land at Fallodon, his ancestral home in Northumberland, after his grandfather granted permission, as long as the company opened a ‘halt’ there, so he could get to London for government business.

That was the privileged background Grey sprang from. Otte neatly delineates the local country-house politics, where Greys sided with the Liberal Trevelyan against the Tory Riddleys and Percys, with the Whig Lambtons somewhere in between, all wary of the political ramifications of Tyneside industry.

Following a lacklustre apprenticeship at Winchester and Balliol (where he took a third class degree in jurisprudence), Grey made his mark at Westminster from 1892 as parliamentary undersecretary of state in the Foreign Office, specialising initially in commercial treaties. He quickly gained greater prominence, issuing the ‘Grey Declaration’, warning France against crossing Britain in the Upper Nile.

After a Conservative interregnum, which included the Boer War, the Liberals regained office in 1905 under Campbell-Bannerman. Grey was given licence to respond, as foreign secretary, to a dangerous world where emboldened rivals sensed that Britain wasn’t quite the force it once was.

Having demonstrated his imperialist credentials over South Africa, Grey confirmed he was no pushover, as he defused issues such as the Franco-German stand-off over Agadir in 1911. With his ‘studied vagueness’ or (another of Otte’s precise phrases) ‘constructive ambiguity’, he balanced Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Ottoman demands in a succession of flare-ups in the Balkans. Maintenance of the Raj remained central to his strategy, but he operated to a worldwide brief as he also guarded against American penetration of the Caribbean, and Japanese of China.

In leisurely Edwardian style, Otte explains how Grey survived through a mixture of conviction and ability. In foreign affairs he was clearly to the right of his party, retaining widespread confidence because he championed Britain’s interests and refused to compromise on her naval strength. But he was also a committed Liberal, believing in votes for women, Home Rule and universal education — a position, Otte argues, that was reinforced by the Nonconformist presence in his Berwick constituency.

When war came, Grey berated himself for failing to keep the peace. As a friend noted, he was ‘never intended for the service of Mars’. So he left the war office to its bellicose ways and focused

Slaves to hunger

Anna Aslanyan

Journey into the Land of the Zeks and Back: A Memoir of the Gulag

by Julius Margolin, Translated By Stefani Hoffman

OUP, pp.640, £30.99



Prisoners of the Soviet Gulag. Credit: Alamy

‘It was a gray mass of people in rags, lying motionless with bloodless, pale faces, cropped hair, with a shifty, gloomy look.’ Julius Margolin’s first encounter with Soviet prisoners takes place in August 1940 on the way to a labour camp in the north of Russia. Four years later, waiting at another transit point, he sees ‘semi-cripples, former, present and future invalids’, ‘bony shadows with hands and feet like sticks, in smelly tatters and dirty rags’. He has another year of horror ahead.

A Polish Jew stranded in the USSR at the beginning of the second world war, Margolin refused to take Soviet citizenship and as a result was sentenced to five years of forced labour. There followed a succession of prison camps with their inhumane conditions, everyday brutality, hunger and diseases. Margolin’s account of those years, first published in 1947, is as clear and detailed as it is chilling, his analysis of human behaviour under terror not blurred by what he had to live through.

‘I immediately ceased to be a human being,’ he says of his arrest. His abiding memory is of man being reduced ‘to a bestial condition, where the moment of satiety becomes the culminating point of every day, the sole stimulus of his actions’. That Margolin managed to survive, both physically and mentally, was partly down to luck — at one point a doctor gave him three months to live — and partly to his ability to adapt. For many inmates, however, hardship was but the first step to total dehumanisation, a loss of dignity more irreversible than physical demise. Deprivation paralysed their spirit, making them want ‘to fade into the common mass, to be as obedient as possible, an industrious instrument of another’s will’.

‘Every day the food ration is ready,’ former peasants say of their life in the camp. ‘At liberty I did not live better.’ Such testimonies demonstrate how far from reality the radiant future promised by the Soviets is for the majority of the population; but also, even more importantly, how little it takes for human beings to forget what makes them human, to stop noticing ‘the

Graphic reportage

Sam Leith



From Welcome to the New World by Jake Halpern and Michael Sloan. Credit: Jake Halpern/Michael Sloan

One of the running jokes about ‘serious’ graphic novels is that so many seem to consist, one way and another, of comics about how lonely, miserable and socially inept comic book creators are. Adrian Tomine leans into the trend, but with great charm, in *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Cartoonist* (Faber, £16.99). Here is an autobiographical anthology of humiliation in chronological order — a series of wan vignettes taking the artist from inadequate-feeling schoolboy comics nerd to... inadequate-feeling *New Yorker*-published middle-aged comics superstar.

Every time he feels he’s arrived, there’s something to remind him he hasn’t: a stinking review; a disobliging comparison to Neil Gaiman or Dan Clowes; Frank Miller not being able to pronounce his name; hopes dashed at an awards ceremony; a couple at the next table in a restaurant discussing the badness of his books. It ends in his mid-forties, when a health scare causes him to reappraise everything:

It made me think about how much of my life has been spent drawing comics, reading comics, thinking about comics! And I don’t even like comics! Okay, that’s not true, but this has been going on since I was two! That’s 42 years!

This impassioned monologue is delivered to — it turns out — his fast-asleep wife. A coda shows him going, well, back to the drawing board.

It’s beautifully produced, designed as a large Moleskine-style sketchbook (complete with faint blue graph-squares and an elastic strap to hold it shut), and would make a nice stocking-filler for the inadequate-feeling middle-aged comics nerd in your own life.

Joe Sacco, another big name in comics, couldn’t be accused of trucking in introspection: he has carved a niche as a comic-book reporter, which is a strange and unusual niche to have. It’s one he has made compelling. You don’t look to Sacco for laughs — previous subjects have included Iraq, the Bosnian War and the Israeli/Palestinian conflict — but his drawings often seem more expressive than photojournalism could be, and he does what journalists do: he goes places, keeps his eyes open, talks to people and writes down what they say. He’s as much a child of Errol Morris as of R Crumb.

In *Paying the Land* (Cape, £20), he heads for the frozen subarctic Canadian North-Western Territories to untangle the complicated history of the indigenous Dene people and their relationship with the Anglo establishment. Here’s an area ‘the size of France and Spain combined but has a population [...] that might not fill a modern football stadium’. In just one generation a lifestyle of trapping, dogsledding and building moose-skin canoes has given way to snowmobiles, endemic alcoholism and precarious jobs in the fracking industry.

It’s a story, at root, of two radically different ways of relating to the land itself. Sacco’s drawings show you the beauty and vastness of that land and his words set out the knotty problems of those who live in it. And he’s not so callow as simply to demonise the oil industry or romanticise subsistence life. As one of his interviewees who grew up in the old ways tells him: ‘You’re out there at 40 below with the wind howling. Tough way to make a living.’

Reporting is also to the fore in the superb *Welcome to the New World: Waking Up in Trump’s America* (Bloomsbury, £16.99). Originally serialised as a strip cartoon in the *New York Times*, Jake Halpern’s meticulous and charming graphic novel, illustrated by Michael Sloan, tells the true story of the Aldabaan family as they make their way as new immigrants in America. They arrived from Jordan on the day of the 2016 election, having originally fled the fighting in Syria — and the comic follows their progress in suburban Connecticut, with its anxieties and encouragements alike. There’s the comedy of culture clash; but also little vignettes of ordinary — and sometimes extraordinary — kindness from neighbours and volunteers and immigrants who shared similar experiences a generation before.

Philippa Perry’s *Couch Fiction: A Graphic Tale of Psychotherapy* (Penguin, £16.99), winningly illustrated by Flo Perry, weaves the author’s real experiences as a psychotherapist into the fictional tale of a therapeutic relationship between ‘Pat’ and a kleptomaniac barrister called ‘James’. It’s absolutely fascinating, and often very funny — as Perry’s footnotes chide her stand-in (‘Pat has forgotten about inter-subjectivity theory’; ‘Luckily, Pat manages to bracket her “phallic potency” interpretation’) or give the reader the inside track on why so many therapists wear open-toed sandals indoors.

In case there’s any household in the nation that doesn’t yet own a copy of Yuval Noah Harari’s zillion-selling *Sapiens*, or one whose children aren’t yet at the stage of being able to read it, there’s now a zippy new digest of the book in comics form called *Sapiens: A Graphic History — Volume One* (Cape, £18.99). Illustrated by David Vandermeulen and Daniel Casanave, it’s an imaginative and prankish gallop through human prehistory, with Yuval and his niece Zoe as our guides — and ending in the courtroom in which a certain species of ‘intercontinental serial killers’ gets put on trial.

It’s also worth mentioning that the first graphic novel ever to win a Pulitzer Prize, Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, is 40 years old this year — and has been republished as a handsome and well-priced two-volume boxed set (Viking, £20). Here’s a rightly acknowledged pinnacle of graphic storytelling, exploring the cartoonist’s relationship with his Holocaust survivor father and the latter’s experiences up to and through the war. It’s harrowing and funny and its visual gimmick — Nazis as cats and Jews as mice — in no way takes from its sense of documentary verisimilitude.

Finally, if you prefer your comic-book pleasures a little more lurid but you don’t want anyone to catch you reading *Batman*, you can always count on John Constantine. The potty-mouthed,

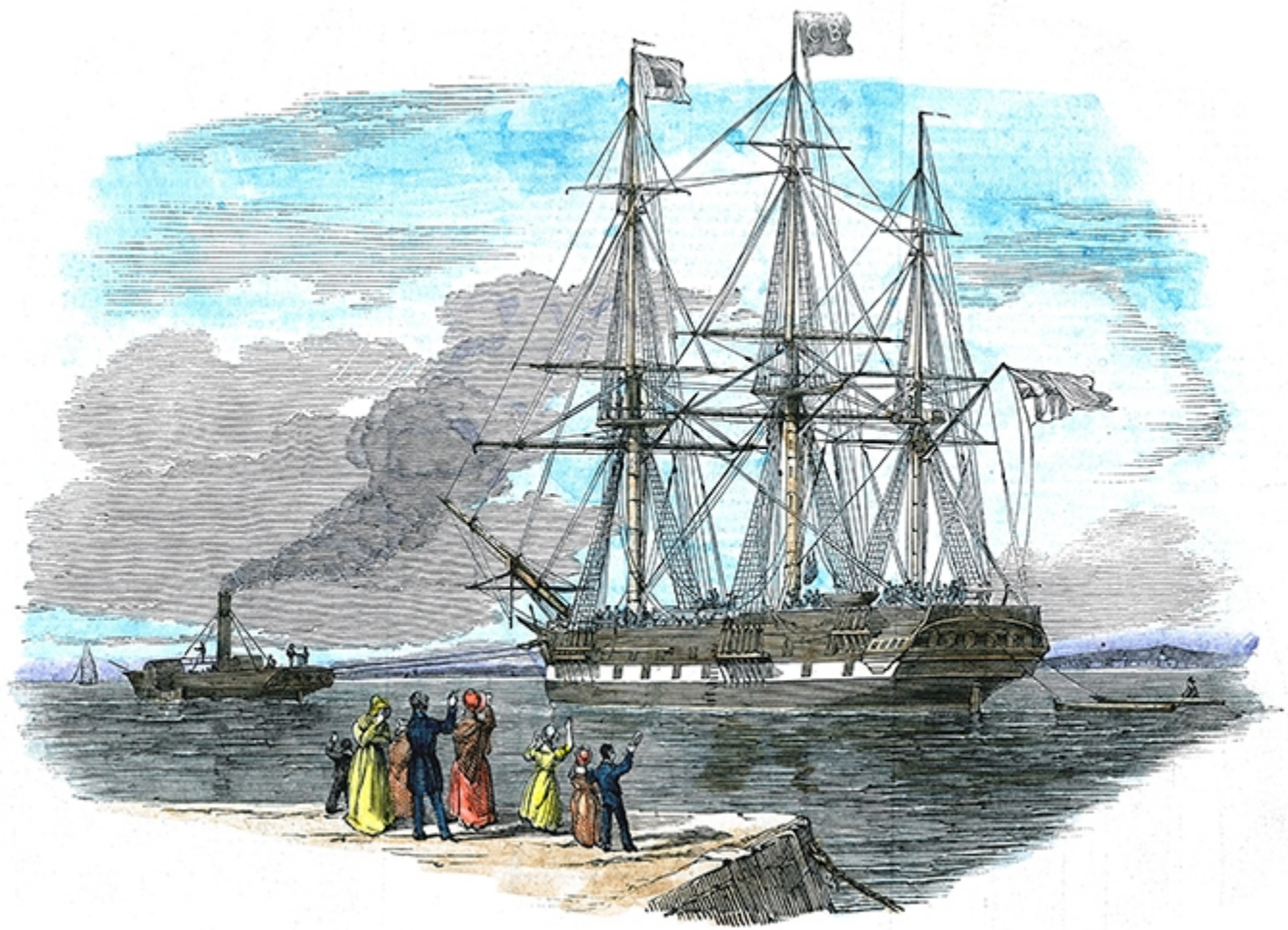
Transport of joy

Hallie Rubenhold

Oh Happy Day! Those Times and These Times

by *Carmen Callil*

Cape, pp.368, £18.99



Convicts set sail from Britain to Australia. Credit: Getty Images

If 2020 has given us something to talk about other than Covid, it's been history — and, more precisely, to whom history belongs and how we've chosen to define it. Well into the modern era, the philosopher Thomas Carlyle's definition of the subject as 'the biography of great men', seems to endure. Most remember their school history lessons as a force-fed diet of monarchs' names, battles and key dates, or as a narrative about palace-dwelling elites whose experiences seemed utterly removed from reality. It is undoubtedly why the subject in its most uncut Victorian form can seem so unpalatable to the general public.

Conversely, it also goes a long way to explaining the popularity of the BBC hit series *Who Do You Think You Are?*, now in its 17th season. While the programme's success can partly be attributed to the celebrity pedigrees laid out for inspection, the power of the series' subversive message shouldn't be underestimated: no matter who one is or what one's origins, history has played a role in shaping all of our lives. Removed from its mountain top and presented in this form, grass-roots history on a micro level can be everything we believed history wasn't — personal, intimate, surprising and, dare one even suggest it, exciting.

If ever there was a time for Carmen Callil's pensive and lyrical telling of her family's humble history it is now. *Oh Happy Day!* masquerades as a small narrative about Callil's impoverished ancestors, but unfolds into an epic examination of the Victorian era, its corrosive mores, oppressive rules, its well-intentioned ideologies and punitive institutions. We are taken through the industrial slums of the Midlands, into the mouldering hovels of cottage workers who toiled through sickness and starvation. We are thrown into the draconian machinery of the workhouse. We are manhandled by the justice system for minor misdemeanours. We are lashed on a prison ship and worked like a dog on the red Australian soil. Our tour guides through this Dantean hell are not the usual reforming politicians or literary giants, preaching their observations to us from a safe distance, but, appropriately, the 'Nobodies' of Eduardo Galeano's poem, 'Who do not appear in the history of the world, but in the police blotter or the local paper'.

Callil weaves the three stories of her Leicestershire and Lincolnshire ancestors through this rich but darkly coloured 19th-century tapestry. The first strand belongs to Sary Lacey, her three-times great grandmother who was born a Georgian in England and died a Victorian in Australia. Like so many daughters of the labouring class, Sary came into the world illegitimate, and went on to give birth to children out of wedlock. One of those children was by the Dickensianly named George Conquest, a canal worker who had the misfortune to get caught stealing some hemp from a boat. A young, strong and able man, Conquest made a perfect candidate for transportation to Australia, which left the unmarried Sary to fend for herself and their daughter, Eliza, who died young.

Callil traces the forced footsteps of George through the penal system, aboard a prison hulk and eventually to the Melbourne estate where he served his seven years hard labour under the searing anti-podean sun. But it was here, in the employment of the relatively sympathetic Dr David Reid, that Conquest's fortunes began to turn. Between the goldfields and a carting business, Conquest was able to earn an income better than any he could have imagined possessing in England. By 1858 he was the owner of six houses. His new wealth enabled several of his relations as well as Sary and her son to emigrate to Australia. For them, as well as for another

Nose Dive: A Field Guide to the World’s Smells

by Harold McGee
John Murray, pp.654, £35



Getty Images

Harold McGee’s *Nose Dive: A Field Guide to the World’s Smells* is an ambitious and enormous work. Indeed it’s so large, at 654 pages and weighing nearly a kilo, that I could only manage to read it at the kitchen table — which made me appreciate its wipe-clean binding. Its distinctive new-book smell (there is such a thing) contrasts mightily with the musty, familiar old-book scent of my study. As I walk through the house, I detect the not entirely agreeable whiff of last night’s wood fire in the sitting-room, but this gives way to the snap-to-attention aroma of just-made coffee, the fragrance of the sliced banana and apple in the morning muesli, the scent of the loaf just out of the oven and the unmistakable redolence of toast. Of course, there’s the flip side; it’s amazing how much of this book is about bad smells — ‘faecal’ and ‘urinous’ frequently qualify one of Roget’s very many synonyms for ‘smell’.

Though it’s easy to be sceptical or cynical about the wine-taster’s weird vocabulary — tarry, mossy, spicy, buttery, grassy smells and the aromas of pine, raspberries, vanilla and even cat’s pee — it’s more than coincidence that analysts can find the molecules for these in the wine in your glass. McGee, whose academic work has evolved from Keats to ketones, enthusiastically explains the science of everyday smells in this near-encyclopaedic tome. Having written the pioneering yet definitive work *On Food and Cooking: The Science and Lore of the Kitchen*, McGee was spurred to research the sense of smell by the experience of eating his first grouse. Our love of game (if you do love it) is partly composed of a taste for decomposing ‘high’ flesh; and the scent of a properly cooked grouse is not that of the heather on which the bird fed but partly the metallic odour of iron-rich liver. This piqued his interest in what he has coined the ‘osmocism’, the

invisible nimbus of flying molecules: countless specks of matter launched into the air we breathe, whizzing at highway speeds, whose presence we perceive as smells.

McGee’s breadth is demonstrated by his cosmological starting point, which asks how the elements were born, and begins 14 billion years ago with the Big Bang. However they got there, the presence of some of the elements, especially sulphur, is evident and obvious in smells good and bad. But it’s the element that makes life that he calls ‘Hero Carbon’, for its life-bestowing chemistry: ‘The majority of primordial molecules larger than four atoms contains carbon, the fourth most abundant element in the cosmos after hydrogen, helium and oxygen.’ The ability of carbon atoms to form rings and chains, molecules of great complexity, turns out to be ‘tokens of invention and growth rather than consumption and depletion’. In studies

researchers surveyed the perceived qualities of volatile molecules by asking people to sniff a wide range of them one by one and describe what they smelled like. The larger the molecule, the more likely the sniffers were to describe it as pleasant.

McGee, the former literary scholar, names those pleasant soothing molecules ‘with the descriptor “sweet”, just as John Milton described the trees and flowers of Eden as a “wilderness of sweets”.’ Though some flavour scientists think ‘sweet’ belongs to (chemical) sugars, McGee reminds us of Chaucer, and Aprill with his shoures soote, and of Shakespeare, and Romeo’s rose by any other name. Today, he asserts, ‘fragrance and flavour specialists routinely apply sweetness to single molecules’.

But what about these bad smells? Sometimes they are warnings, as when a whiff of bitter almonds signifies the possible presence of cyanide. And ‘excrement and urine are two media by which animals can send signals to kin or potential mates or competitors’. However, it turns out that unpleasant smells are often part of a complex perfume that gives an edge to our pleasure. The secretions of the musk deer and the castoreum of the beaver are both used in the manufacture of commercial fragrances.

Why do we like them? The answer seems to be that, mixed with sometimes dozens of other scents and essences, they attract our attention, make us notice the wearer, or respond to the situation in which we notice them:

A touch of musk or beaver is a way of asserting the animal’s presence by prestigious proxy rather than poor hygiene: a refined means of visceral connectivity.

It works for sheep and goats, and for the cheeses made from their milks, so why not use the phenomenon to give us a perfume or aftershave heads-up?

The last 100 pages of this book contain a smaller one on the smells of wine and food, cooked, cured and fermented. Foodies and wine buffs have not been scanted. The often amusing text includes explanations of why iron-tasting red wines do not flatter fish, and intriguing, sinister anecdotal details about ‘chimney-sweep disease’ being cancer of the scrotum, and the dangers of everyday cooking with a wok — the high incidence of lung cancer in Chinese women.

Poacher turned gamekeeper

Rupert Shortt

Benedict XVI: A Life, Volume I: Youth in Nazi Germany to the Second Vatican Council, 1927-1965

by Peter Seewald
Bloomsbury, pp.500, £30



Photograph taken in 1943 of Joseph Ratzinger as a German Air Force assistant. Credit: Getty Images

A common but flawed assumption about Joseph Ratzinger is that he is simply an ardent conservative. That’s the figure we see in Netflix’s *The Two Popes*. Anthony Hopkins’s performance may be a visual feast, but the script leaves no cliché unaided. Better informed observers note that the Vatican’s former doctrinal guardian is a poacher turned gamekeeper who once supported major reform of the Catholic Church but then performed a somersault, partly because of worry about threats including Marxism and moral relativism. Among the truest verdicts is that he has always been torn between different versions of himself. The cultural warrior who could urge Catholics not to practise yoga and to avoid the *Harry Potter* books has insisted at other moments that there are as many paths to God as there are people.

Being the most distinguished thinker at the Church’s helm in many centuries, Ratzinger has a good story to tell. In outline it runs like this. Science is vital, but the human quest for understanding will never be exhausted by mapping the physical world alone. It isn’t reasonable to suppose that only reason viewed in one narrow way discloses truth to us: a rounded quest for meaning will always include the moral and the aesthetic, while also being open to the numinous. Religion is not on the way out. Instead of resisting a thirst for transcendence, we should focus on how to live with it in ways that promote our flourishing.

The snag is that this positive message has been shadowed by a mixture of authoritarianism and an unduly sombre attitude to wider culture. The Grand Inquisitor label is false. But as one of John Paul II’s chief lieutenants between 1981 and his own election as pope in 2005, Ratzinger oversaw investigations that would shame a secular employment tribunal in their one-sidedness. A formal document produced on his watch describes non-Christians, and even non-Catholics, as standing in grave spiritual peril. And his relentless protests against the alleged nihilism of contemporary mores prompts an obvious rejoinder: isn’t the world at least in vastly better shape now than when fascists and communists were seizing civilisation by the throat in the 1930s and 1940s?

Ratzinger and his family were always hostile to Nazism. Yet in some respects it is his misreading of Germany’s tragedy under Hitler which explains his later blindspots about the west in general. Lacking any experience of benign secular rule as he grew up during the Third Reich, he concluded that only the Catholic Church, run with very strong central controls, could protect against ‘neo-pagan’ historical currents.

Perceived threats include the liberal and capitalist order that evolved in Britain and the United States during the 19th century. But it seems far more plausible to infer that Central Europe’s troubles derived mainly from obsolete despotic structures that survived until 1918 in German-speaking lands, and 1989 further east: structures that in turn influenced the styles of successive popes.

This is the background against which Peter Seewald’s officially sanctioned biography should be judged (necessary disclosure: I have myself written a book of the same title). Seewald was once a lapsed Catholic. During the 1990s, he interviewed Ratzinger about basic questions of belief and church government. The then cardinal spoke compellingly. Transcripts of their conversations yielded two bestsellers. Though Seewald didn’t shirk tough questions at that stage, his worldview was transformed.

Since then, the access to high places seems to have proved harmful. Seewald’s once probing style is no more. Ratzinger has already published a memoir, *Milestones*, covering the first 50

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The Venus de Marlene

Tanjil Rashid on the legend of Dietrich



Marlene Dietrich and Gary Cooper in *Desire* (1936), ‘the best film in which Miss Dietrich has appeared since she left Germany’ wrote Graham Greene in *The Spectator*

How to sum up the legend of Marlene Dietrich? She was an actor, a singer, a style icon, even a war hero. A retrospective is under way at the BFI, where more than a dozen of her films are being shown throughout this month. Many admirers saw only the shimmering legs and forgot the sharp intellect, the wartime gallantry. But it would be wrong to deny that body image was central to her success. It was with this in mind that the critic Robin Wood christened Dietrich ‘the Venus de Marlene’.

Like the statue alluded to, Dietrich is a monument of Western culture, her image cast not in stone, but in light (that marble of the modern world, made possible by the newly invented movie camera). It was a self-consciously androgynous image that would shape modern ideals of beauty as surely as the Venus de Milo did classical archetypes. And in the pantheon of screen goddesses, Dietrich alone gets to perch on Venus’s pedestal; no performer before or since has been so synonymous with pure eroticism.

Marie Magdalene Dietrich was born in Berlin in 1901, at the beginning of the century she would eventually become an emblem of. Unlike the streetwise strumpets she loved to play, Dietrich hailed from a cultivated bourgeois family. She was raised bilingually in German and French, excelled at reciting poetry — developing a lifelong passion for Goethe and Rilke — and studied violin at the conservatoire. That schooling was discernible in her performances; behind all the provocation lay her classical diction, her formal timbre.

As a teenager, she reinvented herself as Marlene (a portmanteau of her overly pious birth name) and apprenticed with Max Reinhardt, the theatre impresario whose high-kitsch style — spectacular stage lighting, elaborate costumes — later inspired her concert-hall presentation. She also starred in silent films, of which only one is being shown; the BFI, like Dietrich, seems unconvinced by this period. But it was a formative decade in which she assimilated the tropes and gestures of the ‘vamp’, the basis of her future screen persona.

Dietrich herself claimed her talent was realised only after being discovered by Josef von Sternberg, and her collaborations with the director rightly dominate these screenings. Sternberg, a New Yorker who added the ‘von’ to his name for Teutonic gravitas, was hired in 1930 to direct Germany’s first major talkie, *The Blue Angel*, in English and German versions. Adapted from a novel by Thomas Mann’s brother, Heinrich, the film concerns a schoolmaster outraged by his students’ trips to see the cabaret singer Lola Lola. But he himself falls for Lola, marrying her in scandal, only to end up impoverished and cuckolded.

Sternberg felt this plot demanded a Lola with a body capable of perverting the social order. That turned out to be Dietrich’s. His account of spotting that potential is revealing. ‘Toulouse-Lautrec would have turned a couple of handsprings had he laid eyes on her,’ Sternberg wrote in his memoir, invoking the artist who painted the cabaret dancers of the Moulin Rouge. Dietrich’s Lola would definitively supersede those famous portraits to become the epitome of the cabaret.

Lola symbolised the sexuality of the modern woman: unsentimental, hedonistic, confident. At times, she acts the dominatrix. But with a new class of women financially as well as sexually independent, who knew where else in society female domination might prevail? And yet, the film implies, men are as aroused as alarmed by this prospect — a Freudian insight into the links between desire and angst. The Nazis later burned the film for ‘Jewish erotic thinking’.

At the time of its release, *The Blue Angel* was a hit, though global audiences saw the schmaltzier American version cut without Sternberg’s approval. The English rendition of the film’s phenomenally famous musical number ‘Falling in Love Again’ — from which this season takes its name — misconstrues Lola as a hopeless romantic. Fortunately, the BFI is screening the German-language director’s cut. At any rate, such shots as Lola in silk stockings, balanced on a beer barrel, thighs akimbo, transcended language, an image so iconic this magazine once caricatured another unsentimental dominatrix, Margaret Thatcher, in the same pose.

Dietrich’s other roles were similarly preoccupied with seduction: the cabaret singer (again) in *Morocco* and *Blonde Venus*, the courtesan in *Shanghai Express*, the nymphomaniac in *The Devil is a Woman*. The performances, a little repetitive now, were irresistibly novel in the 1930s. Dietrich improvised Hollywood’s first lesbian kiss and, fitted out in top hat and tails, popularised the female adoption of men’s attire and thus men’s roles. ‘Her masculinity appeals to women,’ observed Ken Tynan, ‘her sexuality to men.’

Revolted by Nazism, Dietrich became a naturalised American and spent the war years committed to fighting Hitler. It was a propaganda triumph for the Germans’ favourite pin-up girl to be singing for the allies. Captain Dietrich entertained GIs on the front line and, armed with a pearl-handled revolver, joined the final advance on her hometown. Those USO concerts spurred on a creative rebirth, converting her into a chanteuse to rival Édith Piaf, her voice trilling with *Weltschmerz* and nostalgia for the vanished, cosmopolitan continent of her youth.

This major phase of her career inevitably isn’t reflected in what is primarily a film season, but there’s a peep of it in her postwar collaborations with director Billy Wilder, another refugee from old Europe. In *A Foreign Affair*, the camera pans across bombed-out Berlin as Dietrich sings, tremulously, in no fewer than four languages. Though she lived out her days in Paris, Dietrich remained a Berliner at heart, surviving just long enough to see the wall fall and be buried, in 1992, in the newly reunified city.

Captured with the expressionistic techniques then in vogue — misty soft-focus, hallucinatory lighting — Dietrich has a spectral quality in these beautifully remastered black-and-white prints, seeming to inhabit a grey zone between this world and the next. ‘Movies... resurrect the beautiful dead,’ the Dietrich-admiring Susan Sontag once wrote. Well, this programme of screenings promises exactly that — the ghost of a goddess projected out of her grave.

More from Arts

Poetry in motion

Igor Toronyi-Lalic

Grosse Fatigue

MoMA’s YouTube Channel

Bruce Nauman

Tate Modern

Until 21 February 2021

Michael Clark: Cosmic Dancer



I could watch him all day: Michael Clark in Charles Atlas’s ‘Hail the New Puritan’, 1986. Credit: Alexander James

How did the universe begin? Did the great god Bumba vomit us up, as the Kuba believe? Or did we emerge, as the Navajo think, from a cloud of coloured mist? Or do we listen to the ancient Egyptians who thought the curtain opened on a giant cobra slithering across the oceans?

Perhaps it starts with a computer screen: Milky Way wallpaper, a folder labelled ‘History_Of_Universe’ and a sharp intake of breath. That’s how one of the great video artworks of the 21st century begins anyway. This summer New York’s Museum of Modern Art uploaded Camille Henrot’s ‘Grosse Fatigue’ (2013) to its YouTube channel. It gives you the birth of the world in 13 minutes.

Henrot’s syncretic pile-up of origin myths is told through a mystery, mostly invisible, cursor, opening and closing videos, windows and websites with the manic energy of a student with two hours to go before exams. The film is contrapuntal — the title riffs off Beethoven’s *Grosse Fuge* — so you can enjoy its unsettling of the Enlightenment project, or just feast on the digital stream that pours forth, a rushing waterfall of ideas, associations and possibilities, funny, tart, heady, exhausting. The definitive internet experience.

When people ask what the point of video art is, or what is it that differentiates video art from film, show them this. Video art is to film what poetry is to prose. And just as a world without verse would be pretty heinous, so would one that didn’t have space for people to fool around with the narrow rules of narrative cinema.

Not all video is quite so easy to defend. The early stuff can be forbidding. If you enjoy eating your greens, head to the second room of Tate’s *Bruce Naumanshow*: full of dry investigations of space and the nature of art that only once or twice break out a smile. Nauman is the Beckett of video art: pioneering, pithy and bleak. It’s not for everyone. And as the shouts and screams that bleed into the first rooms from further on hint, these early works are part of a nightmarish continuum as much as a conceptual one.

If this all sounds a bit too 2020 for some of you, let me also say that the curation is *chef’s kiss*, building an amazing cumulative power from works that individually can feel slight. The show’s logic is that of the horror film. The sounds tug at your ear, luring you on and on — past the neon hanged man and his boner, past the clowns and cages — until, as with all horror, you’re face to face with a beast. A room full of them — spinning, angry, frightened bald heads yelling: ‘Feed Me, Eat Me, Anthropology’, ‘Help Me, Hurt Me, Sociology’, ‘Feed Me, Help Me, Eat Me, Hurt Me’. If social media has a subconscious, ‘Anthro/Socio (Rinde Spinning)’ (1992) is a prophetic portal into it.

Of course at the moment everything is video art. Everything is bad film. We’re overwhelmed with opportunities to watch art forms that have been squished into the tight jeans of livestreaming. And it’s deeply unattractive. Which is why video art is important. The Zoomification of the arts is a problem of form. We’re so used to being able to film anything, and being told all you need is a camera and laptop to do it, that we forget that not everything should be filmed. Or at least not until you’ve figured out a language for it. Video art reminds you to consider all parameters, just as poetry asks you to weigh up every syllable.

Slow off the Marc

Lloyd Evans

The Flying Lovers of Vitebsk

Bristol Old Vic, Via Its Website
Until 18 December

The Kids Are Alright

Camden People’s Theatre



Marc Antolin as Marc Chagall and Audrey Brisson as Bella Chagall in *The Flying Lovers of Vitebsk*. Image: Steve Tanner

The Flying Lovers of Vitebsk begins with a phone conversation between a pretentious art critic and a man called Marc. This turns out to be Marc Chagall, the expressionist painter, who was born in Vitebsk in Belarus in 1887. It would have been helpful to include his name in the title.

Emma Rice, the director, relies on her usual blend of dances, songs and pretty lighting to tell her tale. She has very low expectations of her audience. The sad characters cry. The happy characters laugh. The amorous characters dance rapturously. Everyone sings a lot. The script consists mainly of plot points written in clunky, airless prose. ‘It was the best exhibition I’ve ever had,’ announces Marc after an early success in Berlin. ‘Now I can go back to Russia with my head held high.’ He seduces a model, Bella, but dumps her and moves to Paris in search of fame. ‘Four years he’s been gone,’ she mopes, ‘and he writes hardly at all.’ Then he marches back into town with a marriage proposal. ‘My knowing you has always seeped backwards as well as forwards in time,’ he says, perhaps trying to imitate in words the swirly, mystical texture of his dreamscapes.

Marc comes across as a restless attention seeker who seems well suited to the clingy, simpering Bella. When war breaks out in 1914, he’s saved from the draft by a relative who finds him a desk job in St Petersburg. But he’s not remotely grateful. ‘I hate St Petersburg. It’s so cold,’ he says perceptively. Meanwhile Bella pines away at home listening to the leaky roof while talking to the clock. ‘Each tick is an uphill struggle,’ she says. A fair summary of the show. Later we learn that she’s a gifted writer who studied drama under Stanislavski and read philosophy and literature at university. So why was she stuck in the kitchen listening to a dripping bucket? Flashes of surrealism are incorporated into the action, not always successfully.

When Marc and Bella find a new apartment, they unpack a trunk full of hats shaped like plaster animals (a scarlet rooster, a turquoise salmon), which they strap to their heads while singing a song that goes, ‘lah-dee, di-dee dah’. After the October Revolution, a thug smashes their window with a brick. Attached to it is a letter from the government inviting Marc to become an arts commissar. Perhaps that’s a joke about the communist postal service. He ends up working in Moscow as a scene painter, which also displeases him. ‘Actors are so tiringly colourful, aren’t they?’ Those who know Chagall’s history are likely to find this laborious and slow-moving. The choppy blend of sketches, songs and dance routines becomes harder to bear as the show grinds on. It’s like eating 58 luxury chocolates and pretending it’s a meal.

The Kids Are Alright is a co-production by a group of smallish theatres in London and Newcastle that enjoy Arts Council support. The setting is a housing estate where a married couple, Keith and Karen, are dealing with the death of their child, Sophie. The creators, Lee

Pure genius

James Delingpole

Barbarians; To the Lake

Netflix



What I’ve finally understood in 2020 is that those Roman bastards had it coming. Credit: Katalin Vermes

Of all the times and places to have been on the wrong side of history, I can’t imagine many worse than to have been a Roman legionnaire in the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest in the year 9 AD. It was the Romans’ Isandlwana — a devastating defeat inflicted by native forces on what was theoretically the world’s most sophisticated, best trained, and almost insuperable military power.

Over the years since I first learned about arrogant, tricked, doomed Roman commander Varus and his three legions (about 20,000 men, almost none of whom got out alive), I’ve often mused pityingly on how it must have felt: trapped in the gloomy forest, hemmed in by a bog, waiting to be slaughtered by hammer, axe or javelin by the hairy, painted, blood-crazed Germanic barbarians. Not this year, though. What I’ve finally understood in 2020 is that those Roman bastards had it coming.

And I don’t think I’m the only one who feels this way. *Barbarians*, a German-language adaptation of the story by Arne Nolting and Jan Martin Scharf, is one of the top-rated dramas on Netflix. One reason for its popularity, I’m sure, is that we’re all sick to the teeth of remote, bullying, supranational entities telling us how to live our lives. We want our Teutoburg Forest and we want it now.

At the moment, sadly, we’re sorely lacking an Arminius to lead us to victory. Arminius (Laurence Rupp) was the German nobleman, snatched as a child hostage from his Cherusci tribe and brought up as a Roman, who rose to the rank of equestrian but then betrayed his own adoptive people by leading their army into a trap.

It’s such a powerful, mythopeic story that any dramatisation of it was bound to be worth a watch. But I’m afraid if you’re looking for something in the league of *Last Kingdom*, you’ll be disappointed. Unfortunately, the German writers just don’t have the gift of Bernard Cornwell and his adaptors for fleshing out an ill-documented period of history and allowing its characters to breathe.

Neither Arminius nor his hot, fierce, blonde warrior girlfriend Thusnelda (Jeanne Goursaud) nor his love rival (an invented character called — ludicrously — Folkwin Wolfspeer) are much more than generic cut-outs, going through the motions in vague accordance with historical events. The acting is mostly good enough but again, certainly not in the league of *Last Kingdom* where some of the performances — David Dawson’s King Alfred, Ian Hart’s Beocca — are up there with the greats at the Royal Shakespeare Company in the days when it aimed for perfection.

Some of its choices work — such as the decision to have the Roman characters speak in Latin, which the show’s most impressive (and visually striking) performer Gaetano Aronica as Varus does especially well. But I did find myself yearning throughout for just a bit more of the shield-biting verisimilitude of *Last Kingdom* or *Vikings*. The Battle of Teutoburg Forest, when it comes, isn’t a patch on Tettenhall.

Tell you what I do recommend unreservedly, though: *To the Lake*. It’s a Russian-made series about a deadly flu pandemic — one that actually kills lots of people — and its consequences for a disparate group of typically Russian characters (drunken granddad, alcoholic nympho teenager, smouldering ex-wife from hell, etc.) making their way to sanctuary across the frozen wastelands

Recorded delivery

Richard Bratby

CBSO centenary concerts

Symphony Hall, Birmingham, Via Cbso.Co.Uk



Mirga Grazinyte-Tyla conducting the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. Image: Benjamin Ealovega

For an orchestra to lose one anniversary concert may be regarded as unfortunate. To lose two? Welcome to 2020. The City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra gave its first ever concert on 5 September 1920. But that was only a warm-up, a sort of soft opening if you like. The big public fanfare came two months later, on 10 November 1920, when the all new ensemble descended on Birmingham Town Hall for an inaugural gala conducted by Sir Edward Elgar. The plan in Birmingham this year was to recreate both events, in lavish style.

Well, life comes at you fast, doesn't it? Go online, came the cry from 1,000 armchairs, but streaming costs money that most arts organisations don't have right now, and a lot of space is required to house a full symphony orchestra without deafening the musicians — even without social distancing. The CBSO streamed its September centenary concert from a warehouse in Longbridge while Birmingham's Symphony Hall stood empty up the road, a casualty of the lockdown. You can't reactivate a building as complex as a modern concert hall by walking in and flicking a switch. When the cash eventually came through and Symphony Hall reopened, the CBSO announced a scaled-down centenary concert — complete with audience — for 10 November. They'd got as far as drafting the marketing copy when, wham! Lockdown 2.0. No audience. Game over, again.

The orchestra played the concert anyway, and the results are now online. What shocked me most was just how unfazed I've become, after barely six months, by the utter weirdness of the Covid-era format. The empty seats, the yawning gaps between musicians, the absence of applause: it's starting to feel routine, even — god help us — reassuring. Mirga Grazinyte-Tyla conducts, and contributes a short spoken introduction in the enthusiastic, animated manner familiar to Birmingham audiences, and which so infuriates classical music's cloth-eared, faintly creepy community of message-board misogynists. The orchestra's Argentinian principal cellist Eduardo Vassallo joshes cello soloist Sheku Kanneh-Mason about the football results. Prince Edward (the orchestra's patron) talks about Elgar's Cello Concerto. 'Elgar's music is also closely connected with my own family,' he deadpans.

As for the music (the Elgar, plus Beethoven's third *Leonore* overture and two of Sibelius's *Lemminkainen Legends*): well, having had some small involvement in the CBSO's ill-fated centenary plans, I was predisposed to enjoy it, though I don't think it's unduly partial to say that Kanneh-Mason's interpretation of the Cello Concerto has evolved since he recorded this work in 2019. There's a focused, increasingly refined quality to his sound. His phrasing is eloquent in its restraint; passions flare up and are swiftly corralled back in line. The result is somehow more affecting — more vulnerable — than if he'd simply opened the emotional sluices. Elgar had a word for it: *nobilmente*.

Of course, Kanneh-Mason is still only 21; he's at the start of a long road. Instinct suggests that his journey will be worth following, though you might not guess that from his recordings alone. And that's the basic problem with online concerts too, or at least, the aesthetic problem. (The finances are another matter. Classical musicians are cagey about figures but it's rumoured that even the Berlin Philharmonic's Digital Concert Hall — a premium online product with an unrivalled global brand — has yet to break even.)

It's not as though orchestras have much choice — they have to be seen to be doing something — but digital concerts normalise yet another form of canned and processed music, when all that should really matter is live performance. (Yes, a funny complaint to make after 130 years of

Pandemic panto

Deborah Ross

Jack and the Beanstalk

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Peter Duncan, in his fancy back garden, playing Dame Trott in Jack and the Beanstalk

This pantomime was filmed by ‘legendary *Blue Peter* presenter’ Peter Duncan in his back garden over the summer. It was intended for online release only but it’s also gone into cinemas because this is the world we now live in. Oh no it isn’t. Oh yes it is. Oh no it isn’t. Seriously, it is. Why are you arguing like this? Stop it.

As many theatres are still closed, and as most pantomimes have been cancelled, it makes sense to show it in cinemas and for cinemas to have something to show. During normal times the Christmas period is *The Favourite* and *Portrait of a Lady* and, while we’re at it, have *David Copperfield* and *Little Women* too. But film companies are waiting for audiences to return in greater numbers, and as the Oscars have been postponed (from February to April) the usual race to qualify (by 31 December) isn’t on. So it’s a filmed back-garden panto. But is filmed back-garden panto better than no panto at all? You bet. It’s camp. It’s silly. It’s exuberant. It’s cheering. And I say that as someone who, as a rule, isn’t especially taken with this particular British tradition. (The last panto I saw, at Wrexham town hall, had everyone doubled up with laughter but I just fell asleep. Thankfully.)

As already noted, this was all put together by the ‘legendary *Blue Peter* presenter’ who I initially thought was the one that did drugs, but that was another one. This is the one who didn’t do drugs but, pre-*Blue Peter*, did once appear nude in a porn film, although I don’t think it is necessary to dwell on that. (It’s behind him!)

The first thing you’ll note is that being a ‘legendary *Blue Peter* presenter’ certainly pays because his house — in Wandsworth, I think — is an enormous double-fronted villa while his garden is both massive and distractingly luscious. What’s that lovely creamy rose? Isn’t his fig doing well? He also appears to have some kind of Victorian folly down at the end of it, but I’ve since read that’s in his neighbour’s garden. I don’t know quite how ‘legendary’ you have to be to have your own Victorian folly. Vastly legendary, is my best guess. Elton John probably has one.

The Midas touch

John Phipps

Dan Carlin’s Hardcore History

Apple Podcasts, Spotify And Other Platforms



Japanese soldier Hiroo Onoda in the Philippines jungle, receiving orders from his former commanding officer to surrender in 1974. Image: Asahi Shimbun / Getty Images

It’s well known that you should never meet your heroes because they will only disappoint you. Less commonly said, but equally true, is that you should never google your favourite podcast hosts, because their face will not match their voice. I have just finished looking at photos of Dan Carlin, the host and sole narrator of *Hardcore History* — the world’s greatest podcast — and I find myself disappointed. He’s a perfectly nice-looking man: bald, medium build, squarish of face. But he doesn’t look like I want him to.

Why do we think we can imagine someone’s face just from the sound of their voice? It’s a mysterious but enduring illusion, like the image you have of a place before you visit, which you never quite forget. Since Dan Carlin’s low American growl is one of the world’s best voices, let me tell you how I imagine him: in my mind he has a thick beard and deep-set gimlet eyes. Broadcasting into a metal microphone from a bunker in the American wilderness, he wears old combat fatigues that are frayed and patched at the elbows. On the desk beside him, alongside a pile of maps and military encyclopaedias, is a survivalist’s tin of beans, from which he stops every now and then to eat with a whittled wooden spoon before resuming his narration.

If that sounds rather detailed to you, then it’s because I have spent an inordinately long time listening to this man speak. There are no interviews on *Hardcore History*, no music and almost no soundbites or recordings from elsewhere. It’s just Dan Carlin, talking about history. Yet it is the only podcast that unites my Gen Z brother and 93-year-old grandmother in admiration. My parents listen to the five-hour episodes on long drives — currently unable to travel, they tell me they’re thinking about driving the M25 simply as an excuse to listen.

Carlin’s passion is military history and war; he calls it the study of human beings in extremes. As you may have gathered, he has a Barnum & Bailey flair with titles and presentation (see: ‘Blueprint For Armaggedon’, his six-part series on the first world war, or ‘Celtic Holocaust’, his account of Caesar’s Gallic wars). I have no interest in military history — I don’t know the date of the Battle of Waterloo — but Carlin is a podcasting Midas and everything he touches turns into something interesting. I would be happy listening to him read the phone book.

The current series begins with the story of Hiroo Onoda, a Japanese soldier who fought in the second world war, being discharged from war duty in the Philippines by his commanding office. The date of his discharge? The ninth of March 1974. Onoda was 51 years old. For 30 years, he had been fighting an imaginary war: shooting at civilians, burning farmers’ crops and sleeping in the mud. His rifle was still in good working order. Onoda wasn’t even the only Japanese soldier to lay down arms that year.

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Harbour Island, Bahamas

A singer named Shawn Mendes recently announced to millions of his fans: ‘The truth is, it’s so hard to be human.’ Gee whiz, poor Mendes, and I thought I had drawn the short straw in life. Depressed as I was about how hard it is to be human, friends such as Prince Pavlos of Greece and Arki Busson came to my rescue. They picked me up from my hovel at 720 Park Avenue and whisked me to a private airport in White Plains, where Bob Miller, Prince Pavlos’s father-in-law, had a magnificent Gulfstream G650 waiting to transport the three of us to a place where it’s less hard to be human: Harbour Island, a lump on top of a 100 mile-long reef overgrown with vegetation, which is an escape to a simpler way of life. Yippee!

America was always a country on the move, starting with the Pilgrims, the homesteaders pushing west, the gold rush, Huck and Jim drifting down the Mississippi, and so on. Then the virus wreaked its havoc and everyone, including the travelling Americans, stayed put. Not your intrepid high life correspondent, however.

I hadn’t visited the Bahamas in 50 or so years, but last time I was there I got into a fight with Margaux Hemingway’s boyfriend outside the casino in Nassau. I already had my doubts about the place, a tropical Blighty with an American accent, some parts Yankee-owned. The then mega-rich Huntington Hartford had purchased Paradise Island, and the poor little Greek boy was stepping out with his wife, making me a hated figure to some of his dependants (and there were many). Never mind, that was long ago and time puts a halo on many things. Better yet, Harbour Island turned out to be as far removed from the glitz of Nassau as Margaux’s gigolo was from me.

Back in 1880, Harbour Island had a population of 2,000 and three sugar mills. But after the mills were abandoned, the green acres of cane were replaced by bush once more. Today the place has an air of ancient and established peace, a curious combination of present and past, with men and women loitering and idling in the shade of ancient gnarled trees. It felt like sleepwalking during the 1950s. Some years ago, smart men who foresee things rather than follow trends discovered the place, built houses that blended in with the surroundings, and did not compete with each other over who had the most toys; people such as Bob Miller and Arki Busson.

Bob is a member of Pugs but he has other attributes too: he comes from a very old American family — I saw some pictures of his officer ancestors in Civil War uniforms (in blue — or so it seemed — rather than grey) but he’s a self-made man. He invented something most of us could have thought of but never did, duty-free shops in airports, and as a result owns beautiful dwellings the world over, plus a little shoot called Gunnerside in Yorkshire. (The one and only time Geldof was nice to anyone was when he visited it and sent a few kind words to Bob.)

My host Arki needs no introduction. His house and multiple cottages — and tents on the bay that rival those of Cleopatra — front the ocean. I was billeted in the Elle Macpherson suite (she’s the mother of two of his children; Uma Thurman is the mother of his little girl). I was a friend of his parents ten years before he was born, which dates me a bit because Arki is in his mid-fifties. The day we flew down in record time, Arki made a killing in some deal and promptly fell asleep under a tent.

The first thing that I noticed was the sweet nature of the locals, who were all smiles and goodwill. (None of the menacing looks that you sometimes get in Jamaica.) Driving around in a golf cart with Arki was a bit like travelling around India circa 1947 with Gandhi and Jinnah on board. Everyone, but everyone, gave a cheery hello. ‘How come everyone knows you?’ I asked. Easy: he and Bob Miller contributed vast sums to feed and employ the islanders who were suffering under lockdown, hospitality being the island’s main source of income. In a romantic novel the Queen would lift the knighthood from that fraud and bum Philip Green and knight both men, but the last time I rang the palace I was told she was busy.

On Thanksgiving day, we had a grand lunch at the Miller house, where his son-in-law Pavlos and I showed off our knowledge of Greek history in front of all the youngsters, and they were many, one better-looking than the next. It is said that island living tends to dull one’s senses. I looked for that but didn’t find it to be the case, at least among those I rubbed shoulders with down there. They compose their own songs, and apologise to no one. Their island is a palimpsest, still adjusting to the modern world.

And speaking of the past, I flew back to Nassau on a tiny twin Piper piloted by a young native with seats whose stuffing was visible, an airplane Papa Hemingway would have refused to fly on. Throughout a perfect trip, ending with a perfect landing, the pilot was — I think — playing a game on his mobile.



Considering the subject of compatibility, experienced British expats in France maintain that a French man and an English woman might work, but rarely the other way around. Anecdotal evidence bears this out. The English chap, for example, who came to look at the septic tank has a long-term French partner who once broke his arm during a domestic dispute. This mildest, most liberal-minded of men lives alone in a mountain refuge whenever feasible. He also has a part-time job as a tour guide in the Far East.

I am currently transitioning to a woman for urgent medical reasons. Force of habit, however, leads me to consider the French women I meet every day in this Provençal village from the point of view of a man. To generalise from my daily encounters in the village, I would say that French women do seem to like men, expect great things of them, and are not fearful of the repellent. Which is a fantastic start by any standards. And so many of them are brimming with health and beauty. They are more beautiful, it seems to me now, than their most conspicuous counterparts during the era of my entirety.

But many also have a directness and sexual clairvoyance that is easily mistaken for ferocity. Even if I were fluent in their language and all my moving parts were in full working order, I'm not sure I'd want to tackle one. I've noticed, too, that the firm of Geordie builders who have been here for 20 years, and live mostly in the bars, never associate with the local French women in any meaningful sense. It is true that now and again one does hear of a sexual association implicating these Geordies, but it is always said to be in concert, and with the same woman, and celebrated in a routine or perhaps ritual spirit rather than as a loving or spontaneous intimacy.

For sheer gale-force-ten sexual power, however, I must mention Christine, a hardworking local waitress in her early thirties. I know she is called Christine because my French friend André is acquainted with her and totally agrees with me that in this field she is out on her own. Mention her name in his hearing and he theatrically smites his forehead, or shakes his fingers as if scalded, or staggers as though plugged by a bullet in the chest, or dreamily lifts his eyes to the hills whence cometh his hope. And André is a sophisticated Frenchman in his mid-seventies.

When she isn't working at tables, Christine must be working out with superhuman intensity to keep in tune an athletic figure of which in summer roughly 80 per cent is on view. I first saw her when she was working the tables of the fascist bar and was so disturbed that I couldn't face going there any more. The following season she migrated to the blander, posher tables outside the tourist bar, which I then noticed were busier than ever before. Whether this was due to a greater footfall of besotted fascists or to word getting round and busloads of wealthy tourists coming up from the Riviera, I don't know.

Henceforth I avoided the tourist bar and returned to the fascist one. But I would allow myself a quick glance as I walked past the tourist bar terrace. And there she'd be, poker-faced, wearing not much, and waitressing with her customary dexterity and efficiency. Or she might be relaxing for a stolen moment and drawing hungrily on a very long cigarette. And I'd note the male section of her patrons, many of them elderly, sipping and nod-nodding and otherwise keeping calm and carrying on although mentally stupefied by this amazing form darting about and insinuating itself between the tables.

One quiet Sunday afternoon I encountered her in an otherwise deserted village square with her two young children on her day off. Though I couldn't bring myself to look, let alone greet her in the normal, polite French fashion — she must have thought I was mad — I sensed about her off-duty self a niceness, an absence of vanity. And then last week in the village shop I had no other choice but to hand her my carrots and leeks, because she was working there at the checkout. It was her first day, judging by her cautiousness and unfamiliarity with the till. She was smaller than I remembered. It was below freezing outside and she was wearing a homely thick-knit mustard cardigan off the shoulder. 'Thank you, Christine,' I said as she dropped change into my hand. If she was surprised by her fame among the expat English castrates, she didn't show it. She looked up curiously, then pleasantly wished me a good evening.



If the novelty of going for a walk doesn’t wear thin for the marauding masses soon, I am going to have to buy a laminator. I’ve bought so many warning signs off the internet telling townies what they can’t do around livestock, I might have to learn how to make signs myself.

A bulk order of ‘Dogs Must Be on a Lead at All Times’ had to be placed during lockdown as we started to attract people who would rather be at Westfield shopping centre.

I affixed them along the fence line inside my field, along with traffic cones and stripy roadworks barriers, because although walkers should not be in my field, once they stray off the footpath and go in there you cannot assume they will know what to do about it.

In other words, I am having to tell people not to let their dog savage my horses once they have broken the law repeatedly and gone through two gates and four lines of electric tape to get themselves into a position where their dog is illegally near my horses in the first place.

The builder b, meanwhile, affixed a ‘dogs on lead’ sign on the driveway to his smallholding on a huge wooden placard emblazoned with a neon warning triangle so that when you go down there it looks as though you are entering a nuclear facility.

Even this doesn’t stop them, and he still gets walkers who let their cockapoos loose to run under the electric tape to yap round the legs of his coloured cobs.

No amount of explaining that the dogs may not survive makes the day trippers think twice about behaving like this. If you tell them to please put their dog on a lead it is a red rag to a bull. Interesting fact: we have discovered during lockdown that as soon as you attach the word ‘please’ to a sentence aimed at walkers and ramblers you’ve had it.

As with cyclists, the nicer you are to them the more abominably they treat you. If you say: ‘Excuse me, would you mind terribly keeping to the footpath please?’, then a walker will laugh in your face and tell you to go to hell.

If you say: ‘Oi! You! Get your crappy mongrel on a lead or sod off back to the road!’, they stop, put their dog on a lead and retreat up the footpath, thanking you as they go.

Things came to a head the other day when I tried my idiotic strategy of showing strangers courtesy one last time. We had arrived at my field to find a shiny red car parked almost in front of the gate, but in any case too close for the Volvo to get round it.

As luck would have it, the two walkers came back up the lane at that point, collecting branches, presumably to turn into Christmas decorations.

As they showed themselves to be in no hurry to get in their car, I approached them and said: ‘Oh hello, I wonder, would you mind moving off because you are parked in a farm entrance? On private land? On a private road? There is a sign at the top saying access only, no unauthorised vehicles.’

The man and woman didn’t even look at me. They started arranging branches in the boot of their car as he said: ‘Where’s the no parking sign then? Hmm? There isn’t one. So I can park where I like.’

The usual argument ensued with me trying to explain the law to two upstanding citizens from a nearby conurbation who had driven to the countryside for a little light trespassing.

They don’t like the free public car park two minutes down the road. It’s too, well, common to park where they are meant to.

The well-dressed man swept his hand through the air at me as if to shoo me away: ‘You’ve got plenty of space to get round.’

At which point the builder boyfriend got out of the car and launched the correct strategy: ‘Oi, mate, have you got a no parking sign on your driveway? Well, have you?’

‘Of course I haven’t,’ said the middle manager, a good deal more politely than he spoke to me. ‘Well then,’ said the BB, ‘give me your address because I’d like to come and park there this afternoon.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous!’ said the man, but the BB was on a roll. ‘Yeah, I reckon you live in one of them gated communities, don’t you? You’d call a full meeting of the local prats’ committee if we parked near your driveway.’

We’ve now got one of those nice red signs on the gate: ‘NO PARKING — 24 hour access required’.

If that doesn’t work, I’ll buy a laminator and let the BB write his own version.



Who owns Altior? I ask because of the brouhaha over Nicky Henderson’s late withdrawal of his stable star, winner of a record-breaking 19 consecutive races over jumps, from last Saturday’s Betfair Tingle Creek Chase. Official description of the chase course going was ‘soft, good to soft in places’. Nicky’s description was ‘a bottomless glue pit’ and he withdrew Altior despite the gelding’s proven ability to cope with normally soft ground.

The racing public, trade press and bookmakers had all been keenly anticipating Altior’s renewed clash with Politologue, the Paul Nicholls-trained grey who won the Champion Chase at the Cheltenham Festival in March following Altior’s late withdrawal from that race with a bone splint. The disappointment was massive. The public ‘adopts’ superstar horses, particularly superstars such as Altior whose electric jumping is breathtaking and whose habit of seemingly having lost his chance late on only to engage a new gear and leave his rivals gasping in his wake makes him especially watchable for those without heart conditions. But that emotional stake in him doesn’t convey a right to dictate his programme. Altior is owned by Patricia Pugh, and Nicky Henderson is obliged to consult nobody other than Mrs Pugh about when and where he runs.

There was a special factor: the battering sound issuing from Seven Barrows last winter was not a dodgy boiler or a bit of rebuilding but the sound of N. Henderson Esq banging his head against a wall in frustration at having let Altior open his 2019-20 season by running for the first time over further than two miles on soft ground at Ascot against the top-class and fitter Cyrname. It was a decision that lost his champion his unbeaten record and took the stuffing out of Altior for two months. Once bitten, twice shy. But when Nicky went on to say that the only race that mattered to Altior this season was the two-mile Champion Chase at the Cheltenham Festival, the Tingle Creek sponsor Betfair was understandably miffed, saying that such comments were dismissive of the historic contest that the Tingle Creek represents.

I love the Cheltenham Festival but it does distort jump racing’s perspective. We can debate for ever whether racing is a sport or a business (roughly it’s a sport when we are enjoying ourselves, and a business employing 200,000 when we are looking for help from the government) and Nicky was talking from a sportsman’s perspective. But we need generous sponsors to be kept happy too.

In the event, the Tingle Creek was not lacking in spectacle, with jockey Harry Skelton — who learned his trade as a member of the Paul Nicholls team at Ditcheat and who was aboard Politologue because of the Skelton family’s association with owner John Hales — yelling his delight after he had partnered Politologue to an exhilarating victory, attacking every fence with zest. It was, amazingly, the 11th Paul Nicholls-trained victory in the race. Harry Skelton had won the previous race, the Henry VIII Novices’ Chase, the same exuberant way on the previously headstrong Allmankind, taking a Grade One for his brother Dan as well as his Ditcheat mentor. Down to just eight winners in the 2012-13 season, he is now the complete jockey.

Most seasons offer a cluster of racing books to enliven any lockdown. This year I have encountered only one: *Enable: Queen of the Turf* (Racing Post, £19.99). Beautifully illustrated and neatly compiled by Andrew Pennington, it takes the reader race by race through the career of the finest mare most of us are ever likely to see, the winner of 11 Group Ones including two Classics, a Breeders’ Cup Turf, two Prix de l’Arc de Triomphes and three King George VI and Queen Elizabeth Stakes. It is the descriptions and comments on the second of those King Georges to which I will return again and again as Enable and Crystal Ocean eyeballed one another all the way down the Ascot straight. As her trainer John Gosden put it: ‘Crystal Ocean said to her: “I’m going to win this”, and she said back: “No, I am.” She really showed mental toughness and so did he.’ I have never ever seen Frankie Dettori so emotionally and physically drained after a race.

The other racing volume not to be missed is Milo Corbett’s *Bloodstock Notebook: What the bloodstock business reads in bed*, available online at £25 with all proceeds going to the Injured Jockeys Fund. The hefty volume’s meaty full-length studies include an intriguing portrait of David Redvers, the man behind Qatar Racing’s success, the story of silver collector Nelson Bunker Hunt’s rise and fall, a portrait of sultry French jockey Mickaëlle Michel and a Rolf Johnson interview with Richard Hannon senior, which adds further to the treasure trove of royal racing anecdotage. A horse gets loose on the gallops and the Hannon Land Rover, with Her Majesty on board, screams scarily off-piste in pursuit until the animal is cornered. At that point Hannon declares: ‘It’s okay, Ma’am. I was worried it was one of mine. He’s not. He’s one of yours.’ Unmissable.

♠ K 9 4

♥ 10 8 7 3

♦ J 8 7 5 3

♣ 4

♠ Q J 10 3

♥ J 6

♦ K Q 9 4

♣ 10 9 7

♠ A 7 6

♥ A Q 2

♦ 10 2

♣ 8 6 5 3 2

♠ 8 5 2

♥ K 9 5 4

♦ A 6

♣ A K Q J

W

N

E

S

West	North	East	South
Pass	2♣	Pass	1NT
Pass	3NT	All Pass	2♥

Bridge

Susanna Gross

It’s surprising how quickly we adapt to things: nine months ago, most of us had never played bridge online before, yet it feels almost normal now. One slightly surreal side-effect is the way an older generation of players have begun using text-acronyms with the gusto of teenagers: TY, SY, NP and, if anything remotely funny happens, it’s LOL every time.

Actually, some acronyms took me a while to get used to. In my very first online game, my partner typed ‘GLP’ as I was about to play a doubled contract; puzzled, I concluded it was short for *gulp*. I was slightly insulted that he kept typing ‘gulp’ whenever I was about to play — until the penny dropped; he was wishing me luck. I’d been thrown by the quaint formality of adding P for partner. As the weeks went by, other bits of text-slang completely defeated me. When one man — in his seventies, mind — typed ‘BRB’, I had to ask what he meant. Of course, he didn’t answer: it stands for ‘be right back’. I like to think I’ve got the hang it now — although I was flummoxed last week when someone typed ‘SY I was AFK’. Silly me: ‘away from the keyboard’.

While I was kibitzing the great Brazilian player Gabriel Chagas and his partner Melih Ozdil on BBO recently, Ozdil (East) earned a great big WDP from Chagas on this deal.

Chagas led the ♦5. Dummy played the ♦4 — and Ozdil played the ♦2! Had he played the ♦10 declarer would have 4 diamonds, 4 clubs and a trick in the majors. But declarer could no longer finesse the ♦9. Having won with the ♦6, he cashed the ♦A and played a spade to the ♠Q. Ozdil won with the ♠A and returned the ♥Q — the killing blow.

This is my last column of the year, so MC and a HNY to you all.

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Well, it's almost upon us, the strangest of Christmases. Thrust into our ridiculous bubbles, some folk are stuck seeing the people they don't want to see and other folk are stuck not seeing the people they do want to see. It's all going to be very odd and not a little challenging.

The key to a passable Christmas, though, remains the same: wine and plenty of it. It's more important to drink well than to drink heavily, of course, and with this very toothsome selection from Honest Grapes — *Decanter's* Outstanding Wine Retailer of the Year 2020 — you can do just that. Drink well, that is. And if you take advantage of the very special Santa's Selection you will drink very well indeed. What? Oh for heaven's sake don't panic, of course it's got gin in it and, yes, yes, drinking heavily does indeed remain an option.

We start, though, with the 2019 Ch. Haut-Rian Blanc (1). I'm not usually a fan of dry white Bordeaux but this 60 per cent Sémillon, 40 per cent Sauvignon Blanc blend from the Entre-Deux-Mers quite turned my head. Crisp, clean and lemon-fresh with grassy notes and herbs, it makes an invigorating apéritif. £12.20 down from £13.20.

The 2019 Ch. Pesquié Terrasses Blanc (2) from the slopes of Mont Ventoux in Provence is right up my street. A blend of Viognier, Grenache Blanc, Roussanne and Clairette, it's fresh yet weighty and beautifully textured. It's teasingly aromatic with plenty of peach, apricot and spring blossom. I love wines like this. £14.40 down from £15.40.

The 2019 Domaine de l'Ostal Rosé (3) from the heart of the Languedoc boasts impeccable pedigree, owned as it is by the fabled Cazes family, proprietors of mighty Ch. Lynch-Bages. An equal blend of Grenache and Syrah, it has plenty of weighty ripe, sweet fruit in the mouth and finishes perfectly dry. You're having smoked salmon right? Then this is the ideal match. £12.40 down from £13.40.

A powerful blend of Syrah (mainly) and Carignan, the 2018 Ch. de l'Herbe Sainte 'Tradition' (4) is typical Minervois fare. With rich, dark fruit and plenty of spice, liquorice and scented scrub and herbs, it's complex and satisfying, making a great match for roast rib of beef. £12 down from £13.

The 2018 Domaine André Colonge Fleurie (5) could hardly be more different, being delicately perfumed, soft, silky and almost indecently succulent, crammed as it is with luscious red and black fruit. Beaujolais as fine as this is such a great pleasure. £16 down from £17.

You would be hard-pressed to get a better-value festive Pinot Noir than the 2018 Albert Bichot 'Secret de Famille' (6). Made from 100 per cent Côtes de Nuits fruit, it's extremely approachable and gratifyingly grown up with plummy fruit and a savoury finish. It's that rarity: fine Burgundy at a fair price. £22 down from £23.

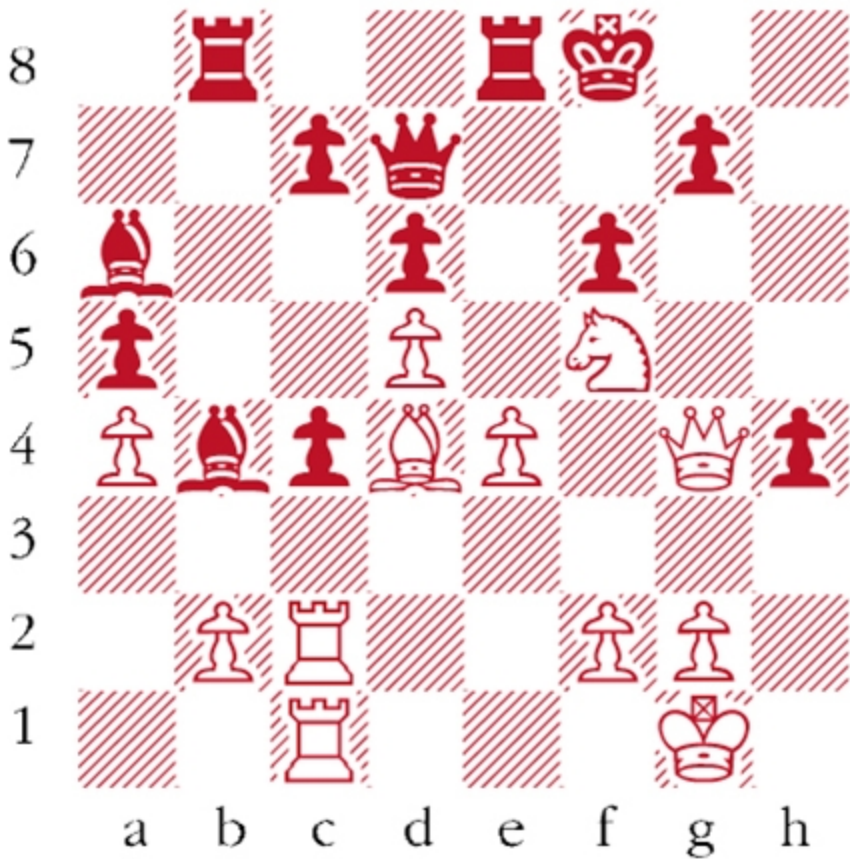
But, wait, don't go, there's more! All we want to do at the *Spectator* Wine Club is bring you joy and make you happy, and those crafty, wine-loving elves at Honest Grapes, Tom and Nathan, have come up with the perfect festive add-on of six essentials for Christmas.

Santa's Selection (8) contains one bottle each of the following: the multi-award-winning, jaw-droppingly fine English fizz Wiston Estate Brut NV from West Sussex; the wild strawberry-laden grower champagne Pol Couronne Brut Rosé NV; the crisp, bone-dry, appetite-inducing Maestro Sierra Fino Sherry; the nutty, raisiny and gloriously complex Graham's 10 Year Old Tawny Port; the rich, dark and inviting 2015 Niepoort Late Bottled Vintage Port and, finally, the delicately pink-hued, wonderfully aromatic Chapel Down Pinot Noir Gin from Kent. I can't think of a better way of getting you through the festivities. Happy Christmas!

The mixed case has two bottles each of wines 1-6 and delivery, as ever, is free.

[Order today.](#)

White to play, position after 34...Kf8



Chess

Birthday surprise

Luke McShane

The Magnus Carlsen Chess Tour is back. This time, the series of online events is rebranded as the Champions Chess Tour with a total \$1.5 million prize fund. It marks an ambitious step forward for the Play Magnus group, which floated on the Oslo Stock Exchange in October and is currently valued in the ballpark of \$100 million. Norwegian companies NRK and TV2 have purchased domestic broadcasting rights for the tour, while a separate deal with Eurosport looks set to attract a fresh audience. Games will be played on the chess24 platform, and the tenth and final event in the series will finish on Sunday 3 October, 2021.

It’s a mundane observation that chess tournaments usually end on a Sunday. Usually, participants and organisers have jobs to return to on Monday. Classical over-the-board events often see nine games in nine days, which for keen amateur players can slot neatly between two weekends which sandwich a week off work. And for high-profile events, it’s easy to attract spectators to a climax which falls on a Sunday afternoon. All the events in the Champions Chess Tour are scheduled to follow this familiar nine-day pattern. All that is except the first one, the Skilling Open, which took place last month, and ended on Monday 30 November — the same day as Magnus Carlsen’s 30th birthday. It’s hard to imagine this was an accident.

Despite not showing his best form in earlier rounds, fate duly delivered Carlsen into the final, where he faced the American Wesley So. Carlsen played from an exotic location, and Instagrammed himself in a pool with a birthday breakfast fit for Henry VIII.

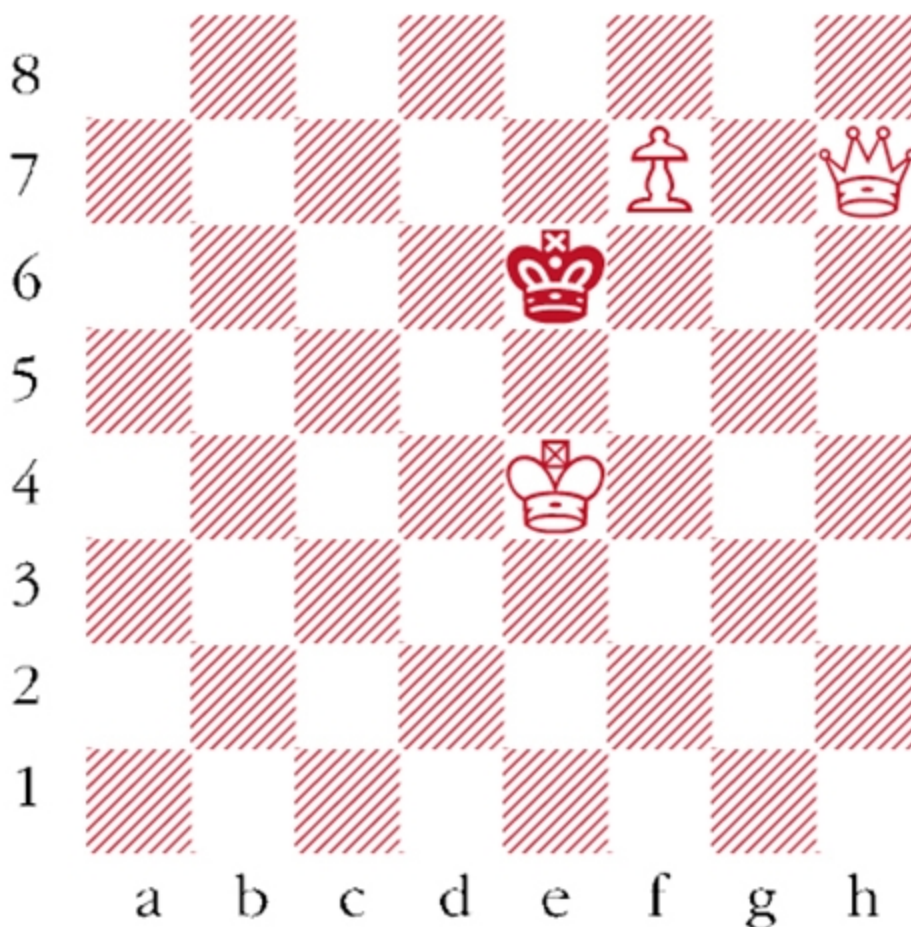
The gods, it seems, took exception to this swagger. Carlsen’s applearcade was upended when Wesley So tied the match and made off with victory in the blitz playoff. Modestly, So stressed that Carlsen was still the better player and apologised for ‘semi-ruining his birthday’! But it was certainly no accident, as he also beat the Norwegian in the 2019 Fischer-Random World Championship. As a guest commentator, Vladimir Kramnik praised Wesley So’s understanding of the game, and suggested that despite his status as a stable top-ten player, he has yet to realise his potential. Kramnik speculated that the obstacles to his further success might be psychological in nature.

So has a reputation for consistent, technical chess, but in this game from the semi-final, he shows considerable flair in the attack.

Wesley So–Hikaru Nakamura

Skilling Open semi-final, November 2020

1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bc4 Bc5 4 c3 Nf6 5 d3 d6 6 O-O h6 7 Re1 O-O 8 Nbd2 a5 9 Nf1 Be6 10 Bb5 Bb6 11 Ng3 Nh7 12 h3 Ng5 13 Nxe5 hxe5 14 d4 exd4 15 Bxc6 bxc6 16 cxd4 c5 17 d5 Bd7 18 a4 Re8 19 Bd2 c4 20 Qf3 Rb8 21 Bc3 Bc5 22 Re2 f6 23 Nf5 Bb4 24 Bd4 Bc5 25 Bc3 Bb4 26 Ne3 Bc8 27 Bd4 Ba6 28 Nf5 Bc8 29 Ne3 Ba6 30 Nf5 Bc8 31 Rc1 Qd7 32 Rec2 Ba6 33 h4! gxh4 34 Qg4 Kf8 35 Bxf6! 35 Qxh4 Qf7 allows Black to defend stubbornly. 35...gxf6 36 Qxh4 Threatening 37 Qh8+ Kf7 38 Qg7 mate. 36...Kg8 37 Re2! Preparing to lift a rook to the third rank. Not 37 Rc3? Bxc3 38 Rxc3 Rb3! which unexpectedly saves the day. 37...Re5 38 Re3 Rxf5 39 Rh3 Rg5 37...Qg7 prolongs the game, but 38 exf5 Bd2 39 Rg3 Bg5 40 Qe4 and f2-f4 wins. 40 Qh8+ Kf7 41 Rh7+ Mate follows after 41...Kg6 42 Rh6+ Kf7 43 Qxf6+ Ke8 44 Rh8+ so Black resigns



Chess puzzle

Four puzzles in one

Luke McShane

Four puzzles in one, composed by Werner Speckmann, 1963. In each case, White to play and mate in two. (a) As in diagram; (b) In (a), move Qh7 to a7; (c) In (b), move Ke6 to c6; (d) In (c), move Ke4 to c4. We regret that there is no prize for this puzzle, owing to the Christmas printing schedule.

Last week's solution 1 g4!! blocks the c8-h3 diagonal, so a back rank mate with 2 Rc8+ is threatened. In defending the threat, Black loses the queen.

Last week's winner Ian Renshaw, Penryn, Cornwall

What the Dickens

Lucy Vickery



In Competition No. 3178 you were invited to submit an extract from a Dickensian novel based around the name of someone in political life. Inspired titles, in a modestly sized but accomplished entry, included *A Tale of Two Pritis* (David Silverman and Joe Houlihan) and Paul A. Freeman’s *Barnier Fudge*. The winners below take £25 each, except Bill Greenwell who earns a bonus fiver.

Mr. Shapps, Sir. At your service, Mr. Shapps. Always a toothsome smile, a twinkle, a child in perpetuity. Mr. Shapps with his electric bicycle, his hair rising happily from his head. Mr. Shapps taking his turn on the platform, waving away the engine, his mouth ajar, happy in his work. Locomotion, he announces, is a necessary necessity. We must travel, Sir, from Q to Z, and in good time. A strategic travel corridor is what he craves, Sir. Mr. Shapps has enunciated as such. We must move cautiously, that is his watchword, as long as we move at speed. Oh Mr. Shapps! — with a single sparkle from his tooth, he must abolish old vehicles for new. Mr. Shapps! with his babyish face, all pucker, all smile. Always ready, Sir, with his eminent fulgurations and his scintillations, and his madder cheeks! See him rise in his private balloon, Sir! Upwards!

Bill Greenwell/Grant Shapps

No visit to that estimable City notary Mr Naunton Saunterquake was complete — one might almost say possible — without an encounter with that gentleman’s oldest clerk, Jeremy Corbyn. This goatish, sartorially dishevelled personage performed, in Saunterquake’s establishment, the function of perpetually creaking floorboard, injecting persistently into every conversation an irritating unease. In deracinated tones, Jeremy Corbyn complained, to those who would listen and those who wrongly imagined they would not, of various injustices visited upon him by his employer, the legal system, the political system lending it legitimacy and Creation itself. Disgruntled monologues aside, Jeremy Corbyn busied himself at no other office task and many of those transacting business with Mr Saunterquake wondered at his continued employment of the man. The esteemed notary kept his counsel; while Jeremy Corbyn exhaustedly repeated his antique Chartist perorations, no customer would question the professional advice Saunterquake had dispensed, still less the fees he charged.

Adrian Fry/Jeremy Corbyn

In Amiens, the cradle of that tireless fabulist M. Verne, the English traveller might not be startled to encounter natives dubbed by their countrymen ‘fou-fou’, that is, blessedly confounded in their wits. Such was Emile-Théophilus Micron, whose mind, like planetary spin, threw off into the blue schemes of laughable foolishness, to hang there unachievably, a delight to all. No like affection was granted his compeer Emmanuel Macron, of whose worldliness it was said that he could glance out of a window and price the exact financial worth of anyone who passed. One a species of otherworldly artist, the other a franc-squeezing actuary enamoured of his mother, they were brought into collision by the turbulent waves of political life, which is conducted in France through high-republican strategies of falsehood, insult and bribery. Passion ignited both men’s supporters, yet it was never a fair race.

Basil Ransome-Davies/Emmanuel Macron

Donald Trump, sir. A man of realities. A man who demands a recount. Bigly. A man who proceeds upon the principle that five million votes equals fraud, and who is not to be talked into fake news media conspiracies. Donald Trump, sir — peremptorily Trump — D. ‘Teflon Don’ Trump. With a big toupee and a pair of small hands, and the American people always in his pocket, sir, ready to ignore any outbreak of Covid, and tell you exactly what it comes to. Take a look at the numbers. It is a question of tests, tests, tests. And what happens is, you get better. You might get some other fake belief into the head of Joe Biden, or Kamala Harris, or Vladimir Putin, or Hillary Clinton (all supposititious, nonexistent persons), but into the head of Donald Trump — no, sir! In such terms Mr Trump always mentally introduced himself, especially on Twitter.

Janine Beacham/Donald Trump

With obvious pride our bustling host introduced me to his guest of honour, Miss Anneliese Dodds, who greeted me with a charming but deeply miserable smile. Miss Dodds was a long and somewhat bony person with the most soulful eyes you ever saw; her demeanour proclaimed serious commitment to a purely vegetable diet, and I was immediately impressed by her dignified aspect of perpetual melancholy. I knew, of course, her reputation as a poetess whose works passionately declared that human lives were precious, that wars killed people, and that our planet was terribly important. These were views whose contraries I never yet heard argued, yet her exposition of them apparently came as a blinding revelation to her multitudinous admirers. She gave me her hand, with the air of one conferring a gift infinitely precious, and I suffered a momentary trepidation that she might there and then start reciting a poem.

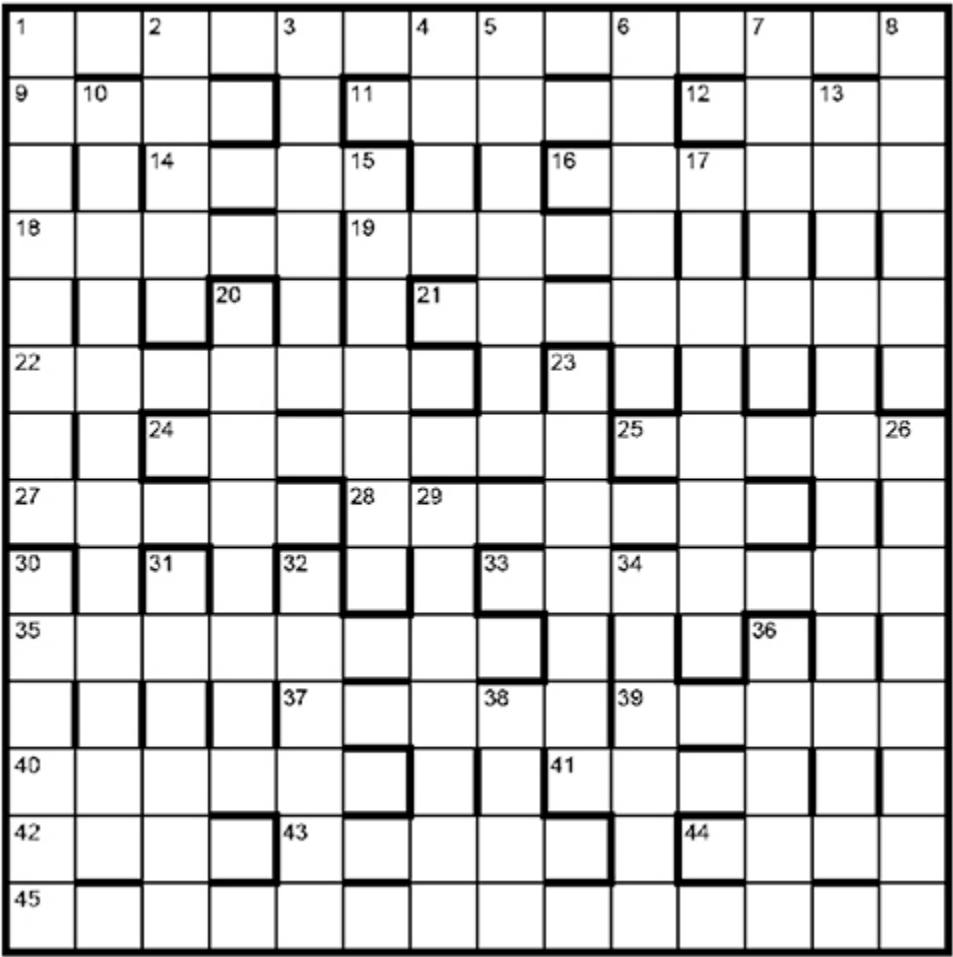
George Simmers/Anneliese Dodds

Mr Hancock’s features always carrying something of November about them, even in high summer, the Scout found it hard to divine his master’s mood in clear daylight. Now that Mr Hancock had elected to swathe his face in a mask, out of which might have been made mourning ribands for an extensive family, his face was yet harder to interpret, so the Scout felt it prudent to leave the gentleman his tumbler of usquebaugh, hot, with lemon and cloves, in silence. ‘Scout? What do they say about me?’
‘Who sir?’
‘The populace, Scout.’
‘If you means by that the gen’ral commerce of the streets, guvnor, what they knows ain’t nuffink. They says as ’ow you is wholly in the Contingnent, which you ain’t and there’s the end of it.’
‘Thank you, Scout. That will be all. Oh — one last thing.’
‘Sir?’
‘You have *had* the smallpox, haven’t you?’

Frank Upton/Matthew Hancock

NO. 3181: NAY SAYERS

This year’s Booker Prize winner *Shuggie Bain* was turned down by 32 publishers. You are invited to submit a publisher’s rejection letter of a well-known literary classic. Please email entries of up to 150 words to lucy@spectator.co.uk by midday on 6 January.



Crossword

2487: Birthday boys II

Pabulum

December 12th was the birthday of two famous men. Unclued lights (including one of five words, one of two words and a pair totalling four words) give their surnames, two examples of each one’s work, and the birthplace of one. The birth-place (7) of the other will appear in the completed grid and must be shaded. Ignore two accents.

Across

- 9 Christmas over in Spanish province (4)
- 11 Border of Angola tramp crossed (5)
- 12 Soul of dancing-girl or woman (4)
- 14 Grand mutton chops ultimately masterpieces (4)
- 16 Everyone shares naughty poem (6)
- 18 Water spirit passing November in Italian city (5)
- 19 Talk of fish repelled me (5)
- 21 Leaderless rascal meets soldier in battle (8)
- 22 Chinese after covert safe place in Iran (7)
- 24 Dejected cardinal fell to the ground (7)
- 27 American without brown skirts (5)
- 28 Antiquated parliament fits up heater (7)
- 33 Dashing underdog saving duke gets reward (7)
- 35 Hilary, say, at home with Bertie or Charles de Gaulle? (8)
- 39 Each expert knocked back trifles (5)
- 40 Diving bird has a lot of time in shallow lake (6)
- 41 Aristo almost bounds off (4)
- 42 Wife keeps meadow free of a prickly plant (4)
- 43 Old moolah left entry in chronicle (5)
- 44 Crucial heart of dessert is some dry fruit (4)

Down

- 2 Someone posturizing that soldier detained (5)
- 3 Ravel no French freshmen rendered (6)
- 4 Article cramped storehouse upended (4, hyphened)
- 5 Cadet Ian flying in plane? (7)
- 6 Work of art from Spain lifted sweetheart (6)
- 7 Maiden stops greeting upright learned man (6)
- 8 Bill enthralled by square lass (6)
- 10 Corporal Frame’s leaked stolen rum (12)
- 17 Port fat pig guzzled (8) 23 Refined eating-house barring a hog sequentially (7, two words)
- 26 Tomfoolery in production of *Lear* (8)
- 29 One’s anti the intro to Elton John’s song (7)
- 30 Some angsty Lusophile means to write (6)
- 31 Noted seaman perhaps meeting Germany’s old president (6)
- 32 Grumble about one-note Cretan once ... (6)
- 34 ... cast in Arne opera (6)
- 36 Tag young bird heading abroad (5) 38 Try and cut second outing (4)

A first prize of £30 for the first correct solution opened on 11 January. There are two runners-up prizes of £20. Please scan or photograph entries and email them (including the crossword number

¹ B	O	² R	A	³ C	H	⁴ I	O	⁵ U	⁶ R	S	⁷ U	⁸ L	A
⁹ E	N	T	E	R	P	R	¹⁰ I	S	E	¹¹ M	L	A	¹² A
L	¹³ B	¹⁴ H	U	E	¹⁵ M	A	G	¹⁶ C	H	A	I	N	S
¹⁷ L	E	O	N	A	¹⁸ E	T	U	D	E	R	T	E	L
I	N	N	¹⁹ S	T	S	E	²⁰ A	C	A	R	I	²¹ D	A
²² N	E	A	T	E	S	T	N	²³ A	T	A	S	O	R
G	D	²⁴ A	R	T	I	S	A	N	²⁵ S	K	E	G	G
²⁶ T	I	C	A	²⁷ L	²⁸ N	²⁹ O	W	T	H	E	N	B	E
H	C	³⁰ V	D	E	A	C	³¹ R	O	³² S	C	R	E	A
³³ E	K	E	D	O	U	T	³⁴ B	N	E	H	³⁵ A	R	S
C	³⁶ H	R	L	³⁷ N	Y	E	R	I	³⁸ S	W	I	R	L
³⁹ A	E	G	E	A	N	N	I	O	⁴⁰ T	A	O	Y	I
T	R	E	D	⁴¹ T	R	E	B	L	E	C	L	E	F
⁴² C	O	S	M	O	S	⁴³ B	E	A	T	R	I	C	E

Crossword solution

Solution to 2484: Troubled

The unclued lights are characters in *Much Ado about Nothing*.

First prize Keith Norcott, Cheltenham, Glos

Runners-up Mrs E. Knights, Wisbech, Cambs; P.D.H. Riddell, London SE23

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The price of vanity? At least £3,000

Toby Young



If you’re a journalist with a fondness for appearing on television — and, let’s face it, most of us are — the Covid crisis has been a double-edged sword. On the one hand, you’re no longer expected to drag yourself off to a studio at the crack of dawn, whether it’s Broadcasting House in the West End or Sky’s headquarters in Isleworth. You simply tumble out of bed, open your laptop and do a ‘down the line’. You don’t even have to put your trousers on. But the big drawback is, you look terrible. In a television studio, you have the benefit of make-up, professional lighting and proper cameras and microphones. Broadcasting from home, by contrast, is a pride-swallowing siege. I’ve often looked on in horror as my esteemed colleagues have squinted down at their built-in webcams, Apple ear buds hanging round their necks, with the contents of their nostrils plainly visible.

As soon as I realised that this would be the norm for the foreseeable future, I contacted my friend Roger Bowles, a television cameraman and documentary filmmaker. How could I improve my appearance when broadcasting from home? For me, the problem is compounded by the fact that radio stations have taken to interviewing people on camera via Skype or Zoom and posting clips on their social media channels. If, like me, you have a ‘face for radio’, there’s nowhere to hide. ‘I better come along and have a shufti,’ said Roger.

He took one look at my garden shed and began shaking his head in disbelief, astonished at the sheer amateurishness of it all. ‘Where’s your softbox?’ he asked, almost indignantly. Eh? ‘You know, to soften your appearance, make it less harsh. You don’t want to look like you’re on day three of an interrogation in the basement of Gestapo headquarters.’ So, er, is that what I look like? ‘Not your fault,’ he said. ‘And don’t worry. If you’re willing to shell out a few grand we can make you look as pretty as Emily Maitlis.’

I immediately placed myself in Roger’s capable hands and over the next few weeks he set about converting my shed into a mini broadcasting studio. Various lights were placed just out of shot around my desk, and he ordered a Blackmagic Micro Studio Camera 4K, a 16mm f1.4 MFT prime lens and a Rode NT-USB microphone. He described this rig as ‘the lower end of professional studio equipment’. The total cost was about £3,000.

Needless to say, the first time I tried to use it — during an appearance on Kevin O’Sullivan’s show on talkRadio — it stopped working about halfway through. There I was, in full flow, when I heard the words no pundit wants to hear in these straitened times: ‘I think we’ve lost Toby there. Let’s go to our next guest, Owen Jones...’

I immediately complained to Roger, who must have been ruing the day he agreed to help, and he told me the problem was my internet connection. ‘If your children are on the Xbox at the same time, you’re not going to get a very good signal,’ he said.

Those pesky kids! There was only one thing for it: I’d have to get my own dedicated broadband line. Unfortunately, BT informed me that demand had gone through the roof since lockdown and customers were limited to one line per household. After ringing round I eventually found a company willing to help: Direct Save, although don’t be misled by the name into thinking you’re actually going to save anything. The installation fee was well north of £100 and the monthly subscription is about £25. Still, if you’re as vainglorious as me it was surely worth it?

I’m happy to say, it now works very smoothly. The downside is that Roger has done such a good job I look even sharper than I do when I’m in a television studio. And not having the benefit of make-up means that every broken blood vessel at the end of my nose is visible, not to mention the black circles under my eyes. Less Emily Maitlis than Ross Kemp after being up all night. I’m not sure the game was worth the candle. At one point, Roger and I discussed setting up a business in which we would offer to create ‘broadcast pods’ for other pundits stranded at home. But judging from my ‘professional’ appearance, I don’t think there will be any takers. I may have to go back to just doing interviews on my laptop, with a heavy coating of Vaseline on the built-in camera.

THE BATTLE FOR BRITAIN
MICHAEL HEATH



HAPPY
WOKE
CHRISTMAS
TO US ALL
~~~~~



# Bureaucracy is everywhere

Rory Sutherland



Having grown up in a family business, my earliest exposure to corporate life was often baffling. I remember the first time I presented some work in a client's office 30 years ago. He suggested some small edits, and asked that they be enacted before he presented the work to his superior, who was called Dave. 'I've got a window in Dave's diary next Wednesday to present the work on up to him, so I'd like to have the changes made by then.'

Fair enough, I thought. Perhaps Dave was flying in from Chicago. Or maybe Dave was a highly elusive figure who only appeared in the building on Wednesdays during the hours of darkness. We agreed to the changes and I left his office. There was another, almost identical office next door and a man was sitting in it alone staring absentmindedly at a screen. On the door was a nameplate which read 'Dave'.

'Eh? Wouldn't it have made more sense to present to both people simultaneously?' I asked my older, wiser colleague. 'That would save a week and avoid having one person's comments contradict the other's,' she sighed. Clearly she was more versed in the world of corporate etiquette than I was. 'I know, but it never works like that.'

We often associate bureaucracy with the public sector, or Soviet communism, but it is everywhere. It often emerges unintentionally because any process is typically designed from an organisation's perspective. Yet what seems efficient to an organisation may be infuriating to an outsider. Think of the last time you bought a house: even if your surveyor, solicitor and estate agent are all perfectly industrious, the process is torturous. Each is always waiting for another to do something. If one of them goes on holiday for a week, everything stops.

All it takes for a bureaucracy to form is the requirement for two people not in the same place at the same time to ratify a decision. Hence the invention of paper-created bureaucracy. But IT allows you to take it to amazing new heights. In many ways, the IT industry has revived a Soviet-era delusion of command and control in the private sector. It sells itself to managers by peddling the self-serving delusion that if only administrators had access to enough information, they could essentially govern everything centrally with perfect results while making everyone else dispensable. Fat chance.

Given the waste caused by sequential decision-making, I strongly suspect that the wider adoption of video-calling will be more beneficial than most people predict. It speeds things up by enabling a group of people, regardless of place, to make decisions in parallel rather than in series. Previously all organisations were peculiarly bipolar in their behaviour: you either spent your time shunting memos around or you went to the other extreme and got on a train or plane. There was nothing in between. The real way to judge the value of video-calling is not by comparing it to physical meetings; indeed most of your video meetings would never have taken place in the real world anyway. Instead, a better comparison is to email — so as to measure the speed of action possible when decision-making happens in parallel, not in series.

If you don't believe that email is essentially paper-pushing on steroids, consider this. How often in the course of a day do you click 'Reply' or 'Forward' or 'Delete'? And how often do you click 'Compose' — and instigate something new? Most people I've asked put the ratio at about 40:1. Any email trail more than two days old should probably have been a conversation to begin with.

## DEAR MARY

---

Dear Mary



Q. I am extremely fond of an artist friend, despite the fact that I have never liked her work or bought any of it. I always had the excuse that it was too big for my house. Unfortunately she has given me an early Christmas present of one of her smaller paintings, about 2ft square, and clearly expects me to hang it where it can be seen by all. Mary, it is not to my taste but I do not want to undermine her fragile self-confidence by not hanging it. What is the solution?

— Name and address withheld

A. *Take the painting to a framer and ask that a mirror in dusky Georgian glass be affixed to the back of it so that the artwork can be 'reversible'. You can never have enough mirrors. In this way you can still hang the painting — perhaps in your hallway — but with the mirror section facing outwards. When you know she is coming to visit, flip it around so that her painting appears to enjoy pride of place.*

Q. We live in Western Australia, where the only Covid restrictions that affect us are interstate travel, which means that our children and grandchildren will not be spending Christmas with us this year. The upside is that for once we can have a quiet time with no pressure to do anything. However, all our lovely neighbours have decided we need company for Christmas and New Year and are insisting we spend time over the holidays with them. Although we are very appreciative of their kindness, we would much rather be on our own. How do we do this without hurting anyone's feelings?

— A.M., Western Australia

A. *Tell your well-meaning neighbours that, ironically, this is the one year when you are specifically resisting the chance to socialise. You and your husband are giving each other intense online cookery/gardening/painting courses for Christmas as it's the one time in your lives that you know you will be able to focus on the course work without interruptions.*

Q. We fell out of the habit, many years ago, of giving Christmas 'boxes' to the postman, milkman, bin men, etc. This year we have stayed in the country most of the year and I would like to make an effort to express our gratitude for their keeping us going during the various lockdowns. How much cash would be appropriate? I don't want to overdo it and upstage our neighbours, but £10, which is what we used to give, seems a little nugatory these days.

— M.D., Andover, Hants

A. *Having taken a straw poll of other country-dwellers: if you are in the Big House, then £50 per postman and milkman and bin lorry is an appropriate thanks for their heroics during 2020. If you are in a smaller house, then £20 each would be right. Try to get some £5 notes from the bank. These are much appreciated by other delivery drivers.*



# Tales of war and lockdown

Bruce Anderson



We were celebrating the end of lockdown by talking about war and deer stalking — over a business lunch, naturally. My friend David Mathew, from a distinguished legal, military and political family, told a story about Churchill’s arrival in Athens at Christmas in 1944. David’s father, Robert, then a young officer, was sent to meet the great man, who was grumpy and preoccupied, with good reason. He had come to save Greece from communism, with little guarantee of help from the Americans, let alone left-wing opinion in Britain. The sucking-up to ‘Uncle Joe’ Stalin may have been necessary to win the war. It would not be helpful for winning the peace.

Robert and Churchill’s arrival at the embassy was heralded by sniper fire, and young Mathew shoved the PM through the door. They landed in a heap. Churchill: ‘Do you normally push prime ministers around?’ Mathew: ‘Sir, I’d rather have an angry prime minister than a dead one.’ Churchill: ‘What did you say your name was?’ ‘Mathew, sir’. ‘Any relation of General Charles?’ ‘My father, sir.’ Churchill’s mood instantly softened. ‘We charged together at Omdurman.’ Soon afterwards, Robert was a Tory candidate.

Rory, a younger friend, had been shooting hinds in Perthshire. Deer stalking, the greatest of sports, is about as much fun as you can have wearing clothes. In my case, the pleasures may be past, for I have done too much stalking with knife, fork and glass. But it is good to listen to stalking talk. Although the Highlands are festooned in winter, the only snowflakes there are ones that cover hills.

Friends had stories about coping with the recent nonsense. One group found a restaurant which entertained them in an underground room. A man with a special forces background caught the mood. ‘Must have been a bit like this in occupied France: having your dinner in a cellar, while someone cocks an ear for the Gestapo.’

During the month of deprivation, I discovered another hazard, which threatens to endure into normal times. You cannot trust supermarketcheese. Sainsbury’s and Waitrose have been deceiving their customers. You see a rustic-looking Camembert, but when you scrutinise the small print you find it is made from pasteurised milk. This is presumably some dastardly French plot to exploit British ignorance. Our supermarkets compound the outrage by claiming that the cheese is adulterated for safety’s sake. Rubbish. I did discover an alternative, from Brittany. I am surprised it is allowed to call itself Camembert, but it is indistinguishable from the proper Norman stuff. It should not be so hard to find proper cheese, rather than ersatz made from chalk to suit the palates of snowflakes.

That said, toasts were raised to the French at another post-lockdown business luncheon. We drank three magnificent bottles. The first was a Chablis Grand Cru Blanchot 2016 from the house of Droin, which has been in business for 400 years. In those centuries, I wonder if they have ever eaten pasteurised cheese. No, that is an insulting suggestion. The wine had everything, and in harmony. Fruit, acid, honey, flint: some of us thought that we had never tasted a better Chablis. Even so, it will evolve further over the coming years.

The second white was an Hospice de Beaune Meursault Genevrières 2002. Straight from the pouring, it seemed to be showing its age. There was plenty of structure; was there enough fruit? But it opened out. We decided it should have been decanted and given a little more time. Still, it was delicious. We finished with a Cos d’Estournel 2005: a really serious claret. Mature now, it will last for decades.

Good fellowship, outstanding wine: the lockdown receded into the distance. That is the place for it.

### Fortuitous



'I was looking at the sports pages,' said my husband, stirring in his armchair. I was looking for examples of *fortuitous* used as though it meant 'fortunate'. You and I know that it means 'produced by chance', and it seems a pity to lose the distinction.

The sports pages were indeed thronged with *fortuitous*. Football, it seems, is a game of chance. It didn't take long to get a writer in the *Daily Mail* bang to rights. 'Only occasionally will you get lucky. Arsenal did ride their luck to down Klopp's team in London towards the end of last season but may have to wait a while to be so fortuitous again.'

There it must have been intended to mean 'fortunate'. Of course fortune may be bad, though *lucky* and *fortunate* tend to mean good luck and fortune. The verbal roots of *fortuitous* and *fortune* intertwine, but the ancient Romans used *fortuitus* in just the random sense we do.

The earliest citation of *fortuitous* in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, from 1653, is the philosopher Henry More writing about a 'fortuitous concourse of Atoms'. That was a straight reference to Cicero. I daren't trespass on the territory of Ancient and Modern, since as a girl I was denied a classical education, but Cicero was opposing the 'monstrous' theory of Epicureanism that 'the sky and earth were formed, not through the compulsion of any natural law, but through a certain accidental concourse [*concursum fortuitum*]'.

So the *fortuitous* was not providential, nor even the domain of Fortuna — Dame Fortune as she was known in medieval England — sitting above her wheel of fortune as kings and potentates rose and fell, 'Now up, now down as boket in a welle,' as Chaucer wrote of the affective spirits of lovers. As Ignatius J. Reilly in John Kennedy Toole's novel *A Confederacy of Dunces* remarks, taking his cue from Boethius: 'There was no use fighting Fortuna until the cycle was over.'

You can, I think, insure yourself against fortuitous events, but if, for example, you knew the rotor blades of a machine were cracking, their shearing off would not be fortuitous. An aeroplane crashing into your house *would* be fortuitous, but not, from most points of view, fortunate.

*Dot Wordsworth*



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